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Architecture and Counter-revolution: The Ideology of the Historiography of the Soviet "Avant-garde"

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Architecture and Counter-revolution

The ideology of the historiography of the Soviet “avant-garde”

PhD Thesis

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Part One
Stories of “the Avant-garde”

1 – “The Historiographical Link”

Redemptory “modernism”

Let us start with two pieces of historical fiction.

In 2012 the novel *The Architects*, by Stefan Heym, was published in English for the first time by Daunt Books. Heym, an important, liberal oppositionist, East German writer whose workings are by now mostly available to the English-speaking public, had seen his first attempt to publish this volume in the UK, sometime in the mid-70s, refused.¹ The novel had been written originally in English, as Heym frequently did, since he was aware that much of his work was unsuitable for publication in the GDR. This particular work was especially delicate. Heym’s first foray into a direct critique of Stalinism, written between 1963 and 1965, *The Architects* would become his last published work. It was published in Germany only in 2000, one year before his death, and would wait another twelve years to be published in the language it was originally written in.

In the same year of 2012 a book on the work of an internationally successful London-based architect, Zaha Hadid, was published, in both German and English, by Zurich's Galerie Gmurzynska. One might ask why this book is counted here as a piece of historical fiction, but it is a peculiar book. Somewhere in-between the self-aggrandizing expensive hard-cover volume on the work of a successful contemporary architect, and a book collecting together contributions on respected art and architecture from a past age, *Zaha Hadid and Suprematism* presents the work of Zaha Hadid through the eyes of the Soviet "avant-garde". Inevitably, it also presents the Soviet "avant-garde" through the filter of Zaha Hadid's work.

¹ It was refused by his own friend Desmond Flower, director of the publishing house Cassell and his usual publisher in London, to whom he had sent a manuscript. Peter Hutchinson’s research suggests it may have been rejected out of personal concern for Heym’s safety given the sensitive subject of the novel, which embraced a critique of Stalinism in a period when the GDR government was not keen on embracing Khrushchevite reformism. For this, and other details surrounding the long-winded history of this novel’s publishing, see:

Peter HUTCHINSON, *Stefan Heym: The Perpetual Dissident*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006

As well as his afterword for the 2012 Daunt Books edition of *The Architects*:

Peter HUTCHINSON, “Afterword”, in Stefan HEYM, *The Architects*, Daunt Books, London, 2012

These two books tell us two different stories in two different ways, but both of them revolve around one central idea – A particular architectural heritage, imbued with an inherently revolutionary character, returns from the past and redeems us.

Of the two books, *The Architects* is the more aggressive in presenting this narrative of redemption. It takes place in an unnamed city in the GDR, and centres on the character of Julia Sundstrom, and her growth as an independent woman and an architect. Julia, having lost her parents (both of them BAUHAUS architects) in the Soviet Union during their exile from Germany in the 30s, was adopted by one of their friends, Arnold Sundstrom (also a BAUHAUS architect), raised by him and eventually married him. Sundstrom had survived the period of exile and had come to embrace what came to be called “socialist-realism” – indeed we are prompted to believe that he survived because he embraced it. He becomes the chief architect in this East German town, with Julia and several others working under him, and they have just completed the first phase of an undertaking called the World Peace Road, which functions as an obvious metaphor for the Stalinallee in Berlin. When the novel starts, in 1956, the design for the second phase of the road is entering an open competition.²

As part of the Khrushchev reforms, which among other things involved a relaxation of the labour-camp penal system, another, fourth, BAUHAUS architect, Daniel Wollin, who had joined Sundstrom and Julia’s parents in exile, and who, like Julia’s parents, did not go through the period unscathed, yet managed to survive, is released and returns to their home town, and

² The Stalinallee too is a monumental avenue, in the centre of East Berlin, which served as a model for period urban reconstruction in the GDR, and, like the World Peace Road, built in two phases. The first phase, launched in 1949 and built from 51 onwards in the monumental sort-of-classicist style typically associated with “Stalinism”, was followed by a new development towards the city centre after 61 built of modernist housing blocks perpendicular to the street. With this new development came the rechristening of the street to its contemporary name, Karl-Marx-Allee. For more on its history, which we don’t need in detail here, see:

Friedrich FÜRLINGER, “City Planning in Divided Berlin”, in Charles B. ROBSON, *Berlin: Pivot of German Destiny*, University of North Carolina Press, 1960

Brian LADD, *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1998

Maria GIUDICI, “The Last Great Street of Europe: The Rise and Fall of Stalinallee”, in *AA Files* Nr.65 (2012), pp.124-133

Maria GIUDICI, *The Street as a Project*, PhD thesis, Delft Technical University, 2014

ends up working in the same Sundstrom-lead office.³ Wollin had remained in his prison-camp period faithful to his original BAUHAUS education, and he returns at the same time that official Soviet guidelines for architecture are under revision. Together with him comes “modernism”.

The story evolves through Julia’s perspective, as she who distances herself from Sundstrom and his “socialist-realism”, to grow fond of Wollin and his “modernism”. At the end of the novel, it is revealed that Sundstrom betrayed not only “modernism” to survive exile, but his friends as well. It was he who denounced both Wollin and Julia’s parents to the authorities. From the great figure that he had been in the eyes of Julia, he is shown to be a flawed man, not exactly a villain, but dishonest and cowardly. At the same time, “socialist-realism” is shown to be not the glorious expression of the socialist reconstruction of city and society, but an empty monumental architecture far from the real needs of the real people. Through the characters of Sundstrom and Wollin, we come to associate “socialist-realism” with disloyalty and bad character, and “modernism” with persevering loyalty and decency. “Modernism” comes to liberate both Julia and socialism from their really existing shackles, and as she finds true love, “true socialism”, as the opposite of “really existing socialism”, also becomes possible. “Socialist-realism” comes tumbling down together with “Stalinism” at the very end of the novel when Sundstrom’s model for the second phase of the World Peace Road literally falls apart during the public opening of the competition results, a competition he still won with a design of compromise – for change cannot happen too fast – while Julia and Wollin and their steadfastly “modernist” design gain an honourable mention and the promise of a bright future as the light of Sundstrom’s “Stalinist” architecture dims.

To understand the relevance of this novel in the context of the historiography of socialist architecture one must understand the way in which its fusion of architectural and political meanings in a single narrative happens at a time when the system of political categories is undergoing change in both East and West. In the Soviet Union the Khrushchovite reforms are in full swing in 56, the date of the novel’s action. It is the year of the famed “secret speech” in the 20th Congress of the CPSU that essentially invented the category of “Stalinism”, and as we shall examine in greater detail later in the thesis, two years after the 54 denunciation of the monumental neo-classical architecture characteristic of the previous two decades was made institutional at that year’s Builder’s Conference.

³ It’s important to note that in the GDR, like in the Soviet Union, these offices are public offices and the architects working there are public servants – Sundstrom leads the office, does not own it.

In the West, the re-organisation of political categories happens a bit earlier, and is, in a sense, more urgent. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the end of the great anti-fascist alliance, and the onset of the cold war, the categories that dominated political discourse up to 1939 were displaced. Those categories functioned under the fundamental duality of “socialism” versus “capitalism”. “Fascism” was not an operative political category in the West except in the vocabulary of supporters of “socialism” in one form or another, up till the moment Germany invaded Poland. Indeed, the system of alliances in the West had seemed for years to indicate that the Western colonial-imperial powers treated Nazi Germany, and fascist states in general, as allies against the Bolshevik threat, which had been since 1917 a foremost menace both externally, at the international geo-strategic level given the existence of the Soviet Union, and internally, through the increased organisation of the working classes as the crisis of capitalism deepened.

The second World War created the conditions for the re-organisation of this framework. The alliance between the Soviet Union and the Western colonial-imperial powers made “fascism”, instead of “capitalism”, the fundamental enemy, at least temporarily, and this allowed, and indeed forced, the “lefts” in the West to collaborate with the liberal bourgeois regimes they had previously combated. In addition, the widespread destruction wrought by the war drastically reduced the proportion of constant capital in relation to variable capital in the equation of the production of surplus value, therefore putting an effective end to the structural crisis of capitalism which had been plaguing it since the last couple of decades of the 19th century.⁴ This, coupled with the political strength both the USSR and several national worker’s movements acquired by the end of the war, led to a generalised implementation of Keynesian economic policies and the creation of what became known as the Welfare State, a period of relative prosperity for capital and the working classes alike. With this democratized prosperity would come a gradual attenuation of class conflicts, which would eventually strengthen social-democratic “lefts” at the expense of revolutionary parties and practices.

This re-organization of power relations in Western societies, and the definition of the newly expanded Eastern Block as its new enemy, required the ideological construction of political categories to fit the new reality. The liberal bourgeois regimes of the West were re-branded as “democracies”, which functions mostly as a synonym for what was generally called

⁴ This is a formulation of Marxist political economy, the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. For a full understanding of it, see *Das Kapital*, especially Vol. III, Part III, Chapters 13-15, where it is specifically explained.

a “republic”. The difference lies in the undertone it carries as it distinguishes itself from some forms of political organisation that would likewise fall under the category of “republic” but are not only left out, but specifically defined as existing against “democracy”. Foremost among these is, naturally and by popular acclaim, including that of the “lefts”, “fascism”. What the West would add to it during the late forties and the early fifties is the very category of “socialism” these “lefts” used to embrace. Thus “democracy” will come to replace “socialism” as the goal of the “lefts”, in effect uniting them with the right in the defence of the liberal bourgeois regimes that become the universal political machine in the national centres of the colonial-imperial powers. As a structural part of this conceptual re-organisation, a new category will appear to define these political systems which are the enemies of “democracy”. This category is explicitly elaborated through the ideological equivalence of what were historically the two mortal enemies, “fascism” and “socialism”, an equivalence constructed by Hannah Arendt in 1951 – it is called “totalitarianism”.⁵

It is precisely within this equivalence that Heym places *The Architects*. There is a specific moment in which Julia realises that the “socialist-realism” she has been raised in is a lie. It happens early in the book and sets the tone for the fusion of the political and architectural debates. It is after a general meeting in the office, where the challenges of the design of the second phase of World Peace Road are being addressed, and where Julia first notices that Sundstrom’s oratory on the virtues of his idea of “the new” according to the precepts of “socialist-realism” are not taken seriously by all her colleagues. Angry when she hears them laughing – certainly at her father/husband’s empty platitudes – she barges in and catches them looking over a drawing of an avenue. They try to hide it, but upon getting hold of it, she actually

⁵ Arendt constructs “totalitarianism” through an argument where some quasi-marxist influences may be detected, specifically where she includes considerations on the historical development of the bourgeois state. These, however, are not paired with an understanding of the role and objective existence of the working class (which is awkward to say the least, since recognizing capital depends on recognizing the class it exploits) or of the state as intrinsically a mechanism of class domination, and lead to an argument where political power gains an autonomy from class. Through anti-materialist categories such as “the mob”, politics – or “the political” – can lose its “public” function and come to achieve classless, totalitarian state power. This puts Arendt as the first, and possibly greatest, post-war political ideologue to use Marx for thoroughly anti-Marxist ends, in the service of the ideological needs of the bourgeoisie of the time, and founding the conceptual framework for contemporary liberal politics. See:

Hannah ARENDT, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Harcourt Brace & Company, San Diego, New York and London, 1958

compliments it on being quite a good first draft for the second phase. She then suddenly realises they have taken it from a book they are also hiding, and that book is Albert Speer's *Neue Deutsche Baukunst* – New German Architecture – specifically from his design for the Charlottenburger Chaussee. This identity between “Stalinist” and Nazi architecture shatters her confidence in “socialist-realism”, and consequently in the realities of really existing socialism.

Heym commits an imprecision here. *Neue Deutsche Baukunst* is indeed a book by Speer, it's not fictional. But this drawing doesn't exist in it, or indeed anywhere else. The Charlottenburger Chaussee is a design by Speer, who re-arranged this central avenue in Berlin, but it cannot be what is described because it has no buildings, it goes across the middle of the Tiergarten park, where Speer did no more than to put some decorative architectural ensembles with some columns here and there.⁶

The monumental avenue described in the novel is probably the North-South axis that Speer designed as the central element for his re-organization of Berlin to be built after the German victory, which figures prominently in *Neue Deutsche Baukunst* (Img.1). But an attentive look at this avenue does not reveal the striking similarities that Julia found so disturbing. The North-South axis seems to be a traditional monumental avenue, enveloped by palaces and ministries and museums, being designed somewhere between 1937 and 1942 as a project for the renovation of an existing, intact city.⁷ By identifying it directly with the World Peace Road, which is, as stated above, an obvious metaphor for the Stalinalee, Arnold Sundstrom too becomes a metaphor for the architect most commonly identified with the

⁶ Speer's Charlottenburger Chaussee does not figure in *Neue Deutsche Baukunst*, being a relatively minor architectural work. The book is composed of a series of designs, usually of significant urban importance, by Speer and other German architects of the time, which are presented as paradigmatic of the new architecture of the new fascist state. See:

Albert SPEER, *Neue Deutsche Baukunst: herausgegeben vom Generalbauinspektor für die Reichshauptstadt*, Volk und Reich Verlag, Berlin, 1943

⁷ One could note a resemblance to Washington D.C., even if slightly more conservative. In Washington, the Mall is but the centrepiece of an all-encompassing system of streets that organises the entire urban territory, in the long tradition of post-baroque urbanism. In Speer's drawings for Berlin, the boulevard seems to exist in the midst of a pre-modern urban fabric, and so the monumental avenue does not seek to restructure the land, with the exception of the intersections, but simply to redefine its centre.

Stalinallee, Herman Henselmann, who, as Maria Giudici points out, is today generally perceived as an infamous, kitsch, Stalinist-collaborator betrayer of “modernism”.⁸

But Henselmann's Stalinallee is, by comparison, a project of “modernism”. We can, of course, see that it is designed to conform to an established convention of a monumental avenue. But it does so through the laying out of free standing apartment blocks, organised in an uninterrupted public space, and disposed so as to define a pair of wiggling built serpents that face the avenue in a way reminiscent of the *redents* Le Corbusier systematically used in his urban plans of this time, in an effort to overcome the squarish city blocks that enclose their interior space in traditional urban design (Img.4).

While this relationship should always be taken with a grain of salt, it is difficult to abstract oneself from Le Corbusier's 1958 plan for the very same North-South axis Speer envisioned, part of a competition for a plan for the reconstruction of West Berlin's historical centre. Le Corbusier draws no more and no less than a series of *redents* facing the street and organising the surrounding area. The layout of the new structure of public space is more radically distinct from the urban contextual pre-existence, but the mechanism of land occupation is essentially the same as in the Stalinallee. One is hard-pressed to find a fundamental contradiction between this “modernist” layout and the convention of the monumental avenue, as long as housing blocks face their sides to the street and not the ends, as they do in both designs. Maria Giudici rightfully notes how:

*“The Stalinallee presents an architectural conundrum as it blurs typological conventions on three different levels that roughly correspond to the scale of the block, of the architectural artefact, and of the facade.”*⁹

⁸ In *The Street as a Project*, PhD thesis, Delf Technical University, 2014, specifically chapter VII, which is entirely devoted to the Stalinallee and probably the most comprehensive and interesting account of its history to date.

In addition to Henselmann, it should be noted that Peter Hutchinson, author of the only existing biography of Stefan Heym and mostly not concerned with architectural matters, points out two other real figures condensed in Sundstrom from the period where German exiles in the USSR tended to become suspect of being Nazi agents, both having enjoyed personal gain from the denunciation of others. One is Wieland Herzfelde, a German exile who denounced another, Ernst Ottwald, on twice receiving the same kind of telegram, which is the exact same justification Sundstrom gives for having denounced Julia's father. The other is Walter Ulbricht, again a German exile who married the wife of another exile, Erich Wendt, after he was sent to a labour camp. These two cases were relatively publicly known and would carry quite the political weight in questioning the affairs of German ex-exiles in the USSR who emerged unscathed, had the novel been more timely published. See:

Peter HUTCHINSON, *Stefan Heym: The Perpetual Dissident*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006

She explains how at the scale of the block it blends the Athens-Charter free-standing housing unit with the historically established monumental model. The closer one looks at the architecture the more one identifies unexpected formal relationships that place the design in an ambiguous space between “modernist” organisation and historicist representation. A narrative of political power, with connections to all the architectural conventions history has built for it, here exists not only not in opposition to the “modernist” generic city, it functions as a catalyst for it. We see in the drawings for the avenue an imagined architectural surrounding that has no building typology other than the individual, free-standing, programmatically undifferentiated block. Giudici does not spend time on formal similarities between the Stalinallee and Le Corbusier’s alternative to Speer’s axis, focusing on the stark differences it establishes, both in its formal characteristics and at the level of architectural and planning discourse, from the Hans Scharoun led *Kollektivplan* of 1946, which would serve as the groundwork for West Berlin reconstruction. Both Le Corbusier and Henselmann would probably balk at the comparison made here, given their different relation to the Athens-Charter, of which the GDR *Principles of Urban Planning* are a critique, introducing political and ideological – and therefore historical – considerations into what for the CIAM was mostly a technical matter. At this level there is no difference between the opposition that the Stalinallee establishes to Scharoun and the one it establishes to Le Corbusier. But it remains difficult to avoid seeing in Le Corbusier’s 1958 proposal coincidences with the 1949 Stalinallee plan, coincidences which its “modernist” rebranding in 1961 for the second phase would only exacerbate.

Had Stefan Heym been more architecturally informed, he might have pointed out that all this may not have been so different from Speer after all. In the very same *Neue Deutsche Baukunst* we find a design for a new housing zone just south of the Tiergarten in the Charlottenburger-Nord area (Img.2). Though it is not by Speer, it is conceivable, if doubtful, that this is the design Heym uses in his novel. It has some similarities to the Stalinallee, particularly at the intersections, even if a look at the plan reveals it to be conservative in what really matters – it maintains the traditional definition of a closed city block with its backyards, and the private property of urban land that comes with it. More pointedly, a drawing of a zoning concept for a new suburban area for Berlin (Img.3), which is not shown in Speer's book but in the monograph on Speer written by Leon Krier, follows the same model as the Stalinallee while

⁹ Maria GIUDICI, *The Street as a Project*, PhD thesis, Delf Technical University, 2014, p.271

at the same time reminding one of the Ville Radieuse, with a twist.¹⁰ Le Corbusier's urban proposal is there reinterpreted precisely in the way Aldo Rossi, in his famous article in issue 288 of *Casabella Continuità*, would claim the Stalinallee does, being composed of tall apartment buildings with stores on the ground floor, overcoming the limitations of traditional "modernist" zoning and negating any overspecialization of city areas.¹¹ But then again, recognizing "modernist" principles in Speer would defeat Heym's purpose even further than recognizing the striking differences between the North-South axis and the Stalinallee that he finds identical.

This novel then, published in English in 2012, is drenched in the conceptual framework we can see establishing itself from the early 60s onwards, at both a political and an architectural level. "Stalinist" architecture has nothing in common with "modernism". It is, by necessity in Heym's narrative, its exact opposite. Historically, a vanguard of "modernist" architects was betrayed by "Stalinist" "totalitarianism", and somehow with this treason "true socialism" was betrayed as well. If it is to be restored, "modernism" must return with it. In fact, the point is that "true socialism" must be restored *through* "modernism". The agent of this redemption is, naturally, the very same vanguard that was betrayed, returning from the past, like an inverted version of the tale of the prodigal son where it's the "modernist" father who comes back to the prodigal present to liberate us all from our collective sins.

To this redemptory comeback we shall call "the historiographical link". Let us see how it unfolds in the present.

¹⁰ Krier presents Speer positively in his book, in the light of a post-modern concern with integrating tradition and the linguistic conventions of classicism into the challenges of modern architecture and, especially, city planning. This book is highly valuable for its thorough description of Speer's general plan for Berlin, the first truly modern effort to plan the city. See:

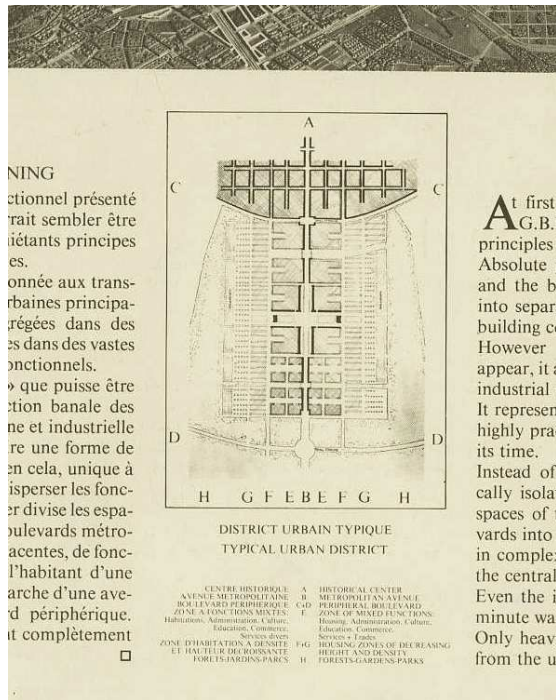
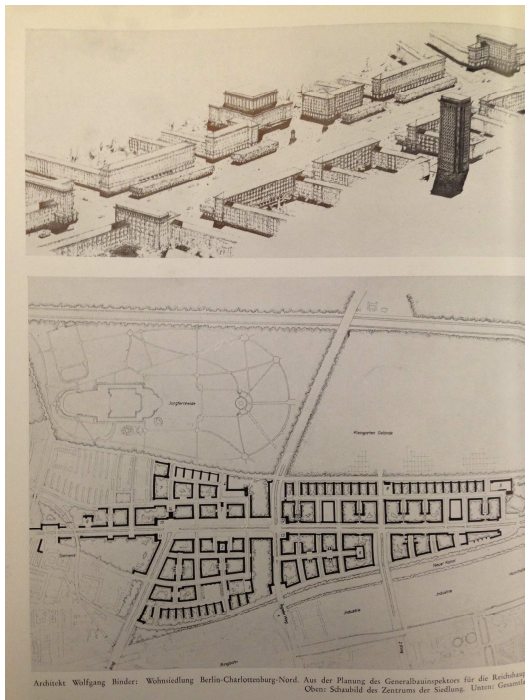
Leon KRIER, *Albert Speer: Architecture 1932-1942*, Archives d'Architecture Moderne, Brussels, 1985

¹¹ Aldo ROSSI, "Aspetti della tipologia residenziale a Berlino", in *Casabella Continuità* Nr.288 (July 1964), pp.11-20



Img.1 – Albert Speer’s North-South Axis, perspective, found in:

Leon KRIER, *Albert Speer: Architecture 1932-1942*, Archives d'Architecture Moderne, Brussels, 1985, pp.44-45



Img.2 (left) – Plan for the area of Charlottenburger-Nord, found in:

Albert SPEER, *Neue Deutsche Baukunst: herausgegeben vom Generalbauinspektor für die Reichshauptstadt*, Volk und Reich Verlag, Berlin, 1943

Img.3 (right) – Zoning concept for a new suburban area for Berlin, found in:

Leon KRIER, *Albert Speer: Architecture 1932-1942*, Archives d'Architecture Moderne, Brussels, 1985, p.47



Img.4 – Photograph and plan of the Stalinallee in Berlin, found in:
Aldo ROSSI, “Aspetti della tipologia residenziale a Berlino”, in *Casabella Continuità* Nr.288 (July 1964), p.19

The western heirs

The second of the two books we began with, *Zaha Hadid and Suprematism*, was also published in 2012. As already stated, it presents the work of Zaha Hadid through the eyes of the Soviet "avant-garde", and the Soviet "avant-garde" through the filter of Zaha Hadid's work. This book can and should be seen as an effort to establish the same "historiographical link", the redemptory comeback. And in it, we are again confronted with the return of the father.

The book establishes the "link" almost matter-of-factly, presenting it as no more than artistic influence, or heritage, from "the avant-garde" to Hadid. It achieves this indirectly, being about an exhibition of the same name organized in Galerie Gmurzynska in Zurich two years earlier in 2010. This exhibition in turn had been explicitly motivated by another exhibition, in New York's Guggenheim Museum, designed by Zaha Hadid in 1992, called *The Great Utopia: the Russian and Soviet Avant-garde, 1915-1932*. And this exhibition must, in turn, be seen as indebted and sequential to the famous Philip Johnson's 1988 MOMA exhibition *Deconstructivist Architecture*.

The book, and the exhibition that gave birth to it, deals with "the avant-garde" in a novel way. The innovation is the unabashed, direct manner in which a link between the present and the revered past is presented. As Krystyna Gmurzynska and Mathias Rastorfer state very clearly in the introduction:

"This book brings together what belongs together. The brilliant mind of potentially the most influential architect of the second half of the twentieth century and the genius of an artistic movement from the first half of the twentieth century that changed art forever."

"this exhibition was the first to place the works of Zaha Hadid in direct comparison with some of the last remaining masterpieces of Constructivist art in private hands."¹²

This was not the first time Hadid and what is here being called "constructivist art" have been placed in direct comparison. It can be seen as a radicalisation of what the 1988 MOMA exhibition had already done, by presenting works by several of the at the time ascending stars of Anglo-American architectural culture with an introduction composed of Soviet "avant-garde" paintings and sculptures from the museum's own collection, therefore constructing a "link" between the "constructivism" of the past and the "deconstructivism" of the present. In the 2010 exhibition, the strategy taken for presenting the same "historiographical link", by placing works

¹² Galerie Gmurzynska, *Zaha Hadid and Suprematism*, Galerie Gmurzynska/Hatje Cantz Books, Zurich, 2012, p.19

of both past and present not just in the same show, but in the same rooms, so people can look at them simultaneously and see how they have common formal characteristics, has a novel level of brazenness. It manages to circumvent the difficulties of a long historiography through the very refusal of the need to historicize. Instead, mere observation, coupled with a few short exhibition texts, is more than enough to make the case for the link as it is presented, for it is obvious to anyone with eyes to see it. The exhibition merely "brings together what [everybody already knows] belongs together" – not just a link between an "avant-garde" of the past and the art of the present, but separate manifestations, at different times, of a timeless "avant-garde".

The ambiguity that characterizes this term is reinforced by the book's character as a compilation of several different texts by different authors. The subjects tackled and the conceptual apparatus with which they are tackled vary from one case to the next, and we are presented with such categories as "the avant-garde", "constructivism", "suprematism", "modernism", and even "cubism", in such a way that, instead of clarifying our understanding of the material, ends up imbuing the categories themselves with a reverential aura of imprecision. Even the plethora of scholarly texts this book adds to those of the exhibition, including contributions by respected specialists on the Russian and Soviet "avant-garde" like Andrei Nakov and Alexander Lavrentiev, instead of contradicting the refusal to historicize, end up, as part of the ensemble, contributing to the construction of this ambiguity, and of this a-political, a-historical, empiricist version of "the historiographical link".

The categories identified show up in such a way that any specificity they might serve to identify in any specific artistic trend evaporates. This is most noticeable in the texts by non-scholarly specialists, but these are the texts that define the approach of the book within which the scholarly contributions are read, and since these don't address the problem explicitly, they effectively validate the confusion every other text produces. The introduction manages to once replace the "suprematism" of the title with "constructivism". Patrik Schumacher restricts himself to the safer and broader "avant-garde". And in the conversation between Hans Ulrich Obrist and Zaha Hadid these three terms appear to be interchangeable. This could easily be discounted as a fruit of ignorance on the part of those organizing the exhibition, excusable because these are not specialists, nor do they claim to be, and merely wish to present "the historiographical link" as they feel it, in a somewhat pre-theoretical way. The focus on this book would then serve little purpose, for it could not be seen as representative of any serious historiographical practice. The first part of this argument is absolutely right. The second could not be more wrong.

The construction of this interchangeability of categories depends, inevitably, on the elimination of conflict. Only once throughout the book does the very idea that conflict is possible within the field of "the avant-garde" show up. It happens, not in one of the scholarly

contributions as one might expect – they all focus on one specific author each and therefore stay away from the debates between them – but through the mouth of Zaha Hadid herself, probably the least knowledgeable of all the contributors, when she briefly mentions, in the conversation, how:

*"there was always opposition or tension between Suprematism and Constructivism, between Vladimir Tatlin and Malevich"*¹³.

But this is one line in a book whose entire point seems to be to blur the differences between different historiographical categories and corresponding different historical trends in order to sharpen "the historiographical link" between past and present. This is where the category of "the avant-garde" stands out, for it does not seem to represent, as do "modernism" or "suprematism" or "constructivism", any particular historical trend. Instead, it defines itself as a broader field within which these trends would operate. The very category of "the avant-garde" becomes then, in all its ambiguity and blurriness, a fundamental tool for the construction of "the historiographical link". Zaha Hadid here cannot be seen simply as an architect or artist whose more or less uninformed views have no real impact on, or relation to, serious scholarly work. Her relationship with the Soviet "avant-garde", a relationship that marks her entire career, is symptomatic of the role serious scholarly work has created for this historiography. Going back to the introduction, Gmurzynska and Rastorfer are absolutely right when they claim that:

*"now two decades later, [...] both the interest in the work of Zaha Hadid and the Russian avant-garde has continued to rise"*¹⁴.

Indeed, two decades before this book, in 1992, the work of Zaha Hadid was still mostly unrealised. What would probably be more surprising for Gmurzynska and Rastorfer, and for Zaha Hadid, Patrik Schumacher, and indeed quite possibly Andrei Nakov and Alexander Lavrentiev, is that two decades before this book, in 1992, the all encompassing meta-category of the Russian "avant-garde", crossing the visual arts and architecture, had also just finally established itself in mainstream architectural historiography. Far from being an objective, consensual category, it is one that was constructed within about three decades, over what could be considered two distinct historiographical phases.

¹³ Galerie Gmurzynska, *Zaha Hadid and Suprematism*, Galerie Gmurzynska/Hatje Cantz Books, Zurich, 2012, p.46

¹⁴ Galerie Gmurzynska, *Zaha Hadid and Suprematism*, Galerie Gmurzynska/Hatje Cantz Books, Zurich, 2012, p.19

The first phase, starting in the early 60s and going up to the late 70s, saw the construction of two separate bodies of historiographical work on Russian and early Soviet art, under the developing category of “the avant-garde”, and on architecture, mostly under the more neutral category of “the 20s”. The interest and research in late 19th-early 20th century Russian arts was initially developed mostly in Italy and the English-speaking world. The use of the category of “the avant-garde” was there inaugurated and, moving into the 70s, became stabilised as a term for early Soviet art in a mainly Anglo-American historiography, with emphasis on the visual arts, but also at times integrating performance arts like theatre and dancing - music was never integrated in the same accounts, with the exception of Camilla Gray, the founder of the trend in the early 60s.¹⁵ The work on “the 20s” architecture began in Italy and France roughly at the same time, to then spread out over Europe and America during the 70s. Throughout these two decades, the two fields of work rarely mixed. Those who worked on “avant-garde” art, and those who worked on “20s” architecture, were different people with little mutual concern apart from interest in the same period. Crossovers, when they happened, were of no serious consequence for the two different historiographies. The one single exception to this can be found in the Italian production, where in the second half of the 60s there was already no fundamental division between the two fields, the use of the category of “the avant-garde” was generalised, and all the work was heavily politicised.

The second historiographical phase, starting in the turn to the 80s, can be defined by the universal explicit fixation of “the avant-garde” as the term for the broad category, or meta-category, that it is commonly understood to mean today. This happened through the merging of the two pre-existing historiographies of art and of architecture into a single body, a merger led by the discipline of architecture, in the UK, through the journal *Architectural Design*. This two-phase breakdown of the history of this historiography will be relevant to the analysis made in Part II. For now this brief periodisation is sufficient.

Zaha Hadid follows this timeline to the letter. In designing the 1992 exhibition *The Great Utopia: the Russian and Soviet Avant-garde, 1915-1932* in New York, she plays an active part in the second historiographical phase. She does this at the end of a string of special issues of *A.D.* on the Soviet “avant-garde” guest-edited by Catherine Cooke that establishes this category for an English-speaking architectural public, and immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union

¹⁵ The fact that Gray was daughter-in-law of Sergei Prokofiev is probably sufficient explanation for this exception.

that makes such an exhibition of previously inaccessible works possible. Hadid places the start of her lifelong interest in this art and architecture during her education at the Architectural Association, where her teacher Elia Zenghelis starts introducing it in the mid 70s in his Diploma Unit 9.¹⁶ Hadid specifically mentions how she (and everyone else) was ignorant of early Soviet art and architecture in 76-78, when she was doing academic projects using it as inspiration, and how she overcame that ignorance by reading Anatole Kopp's *Ville et Révolution*, the most influential foundation of the 70s continental historiography of Soviet architecture (even if it was published in 67), and some books on El Lissitzky. Of these, there were at the time four to choose from. Two entirely dedicated to El Lissitzky - Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers' *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts* of 1967, translated from the original German to English in 1968, and the recent publication in English of El Lissitzky's own book *Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution* by MIT in 1970. The other two are general accounts of early Soviet art - Stephen Bann's *The Tradition of Constructivism* from 1974, and Camilla Gray's *The Russian Experiment in Art* from 1962. It is likely she stuck to the more contemporary sources. Gray barely mentions El Lissitzky in her book, having already dealt with him in 1960, in an article in issue 16 of the journal *Typographica* that introduced him, and the Soviet "avant-garde", to the English speaking world, followed by Kenneth Frampton in 1966 in his own article in the November issue of *Architectural Design*, introducing El Lissitzky and "the avant-garde" to the architectural section of this world.

Schumacher's text for the 2010 exhibition, a text reproduced in the 2012 book, is essentially a deliberate argument for the establishment of "the historiographical link", in the form of the proposal that Zaha Hadid is a grand paradigmatic product of the Soviet "avant-garde". He says, in his text titled *The Russian Avant-Garde – A Glimpse Back into the Future* (the same text that introduced the exhibition in 2010), that:

"Over ninety years ago the October Revolution ignited the most exuberant surge of creative energy that has ever erupted on planet earth."

"These projects – in all their experimental radicality – had a real social meaning and political substance. But their originality and artistic ingenuity transcends the context of the grand Russian social experiment."

¹⁶ Hadid states this herself at the start of her interview in:

Galerie Gmurzynska, *Zaha Hadid and Suprematism*, Galerie Gmurzynska/Hatje Cantz Books, Zurich, 2012, pp.43-44

“It is a well-established fact that the work of Zaha Hadid took its first inspiration from the early Russian avant garde”

“Mimesis was finally abandoned and unfettered creativity could pour out across the infinitely receptive blank canvas. Space, or even better the world itself, soon became the site of pure, unprejudiced invention.”¹⁷

So as we move from the sphere of the Soviet “avant-garde” to the sphere of the present “avant-garde”, we move also from “real social meaning and political substance” to “unfettered creativity” and “pure, unprejudiced invention”. “Unfettered creativity” and “pure, unprejudiced invention” had a name for Malevitch and his suprematists, as for the constructivists, and for the rest of a large, and the most influential, part of this Soviet “avant-garde” which is seemingly at the bottom of it – they called it “formalism”, and it was not a sympathetic term.

A thorough analysis of the history of the historiography of this “avant-garde” will suggest that Zaha is not a product of the Soviet “avant-garde”. She is, instead, a grand paradigmatic product of its historiography as a construct in itself. Not only that, she is a grand paradigmatic producer of it. Indeed, she depends on its continued production, in the form of “the historiographical link”, for her own continued, creatively unfettered, inventively unprejudiced and pure – we might say, prodigal – existence. Just as “modernism” came to redeem “really existing socialism” in Heym’s novel, so does “the avant-garde” come and redeem Hadid’s “formalism”.

So why should we look at these two books together as if they illuminate some structural issue in contemporary architectural ideology? The two books could not be more different. One is a novel, the other a standard architectural publication. One is written in the mid-60s, the other starts in 2010. One broaches the antagonistic relationship between “modernism” and “totalitarianism” in a deliberately political discourse, the other the sympathetic relationship between the revolutionary “avant-garde” and the present in an as a-political manner as possible when talking about something happening during the Soviet revolution.

Yet, they also have one fundamental thing in common. In both cases, it is a particular architectural innovation that serves as a tool of liberation, even if in the latter book this

¹⁷ Galerie Gmurzynska, *Zaha Hadid and Suprematism*, Galerie Gmurzynska/Hatje Cantz Books, Zurich, 2012, pp.23-25

liberation is highly de-politicized. This architecture has in each of these two books a different name. For Heym it is most definitely “modernism”, even if the actual term is not often explicitly used – his use of architectural terms and debates is well-informed, and quite subtle. For Hadid, the term is “the avant-garde”, used as often and as explicitly as possible. These two terms undoubtedly refer in the two books to more or less the same historical object. Hadid refers directly to the production of the 1920s and early 30s in the Soviet Union through an explicit connection to Malevitch and his “suprematism”, but “constructivism” and other more directly architectural references are also mentioned. Heym, though, refers to a “modernism” that is returning to socialism only in the 50s, but the very fact that it is returning from a 1930s BAUHAUS, having migrated to Russia and then sent to Siberia where it was frozen pure for twenty years, allows us to place it together with early Soviet “modernisms” as part of a historical continuity.

So the categories have changed since the 60s, and the structure of the Western historiography of socialist architecture has changed with them. But “the historiographical link” has remained, and has re-invented itself according to the circumstances. Now, it no longer comes to redeem “really existing socialism”, or any form of socialism at all, but to redeem contemporary architectural practices in the space of their own attempt at super-historicity. It no longer aims to produce any objective redemptory change. Instead, it exists in a continuous state of continuous redemption of a continuous practice that is continuously subjectively freed from its objective historical conditions by the inherent de-historicization of history that “the historiographical link” is constructed upon.

We will see in the following how the fundamental role of the Western historiography of socialist architecture has been precisely the facilitation of “the historiographical link”. Not simply in a mere not-particularly-scholarly book where Zaha Hadid tries to present herself as heir to Malevich and Rodchenko, or in a novel which broaches architecture in a purely instrumental, albeit reasonably well informed, way. This facilitation happens throughout the entire history of the Western historiography of socialist architecture, a historiography that, just like Heym and Hadid, is ever striving to build “the historiographical link” to the past in such a way that serves its own historical needs in the present.

Part Two
“The Project” of “the Avant-garde”

1 – “The Link” and “the Project”

The revolution in London

2012 was an auspicious year for the Soviet “avant-garde” in London. Heym’s *The Architects* was first published in English by Daunt Books. Zaha Hadid successfully marketed her London-based office as heir to Malevitch and the whole Russian 1920s post-revolutionary scene. And just before all this the year had already been marked by a memorable exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts titled *Building the Revolution: Soviet Art and Architecture 1915-1935*, which lasted from October 2011 to the end of the following January. The exhibition addressed explicitly the link between visual arts and architecture, by presenting works of the Soviet “avant-garde” from the Costakis Collection of the State Museum of Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki, together with period architectural photographs from the Shchusev State Museum of Architecture in Moscow, and Richard Pare’s original photographic coverage of this “avant-garde” architecture in its present state.

The exhibition had been previously shown at CaixaForum in Barcelona and Madrid earlier in 2011,¹⁸ and would move on to the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin later in 2012.¹⁹ Elements of Richard Pare’s work would return to London in 2013 through an exhibition titled *Abstraction/Constructivism: British and Russian Responses to the City*, held at London’s City Hall and then moved to the Pushkin House.²⁰ But more important for us than the history of this one exhibition is the history of its genealogy. *Building the Revolution* was more or less the last product of a continued project, a series of exhibitions of Pare’s photographic archaeology. This work had been previously shown, by itself, at the Moscow’s Shchusev State Museum of Architecture in 2006 and the New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 2007, and also at the State

¹⁸ Respectively from February to April and from May to September. From:

<http://press.lacaixa.es/socialprojects/construir-la-revolucion-cxf-bcn-eng__816-c-13743__.html> consulted in 7 May 2015

¹⁹ From April to July, From:

<<https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2012/04/buil-a12.html>> consulted in 7 May 2015

²⁰ Initially a part of the city’s annual Maslenitsa Festival, a traditional Russian celebration held at the start of Spring that the London City Hall organises with its Russian community, it settled in the Pushkin House from June to September. From:

<<http://www.pushkinhouse.org/june-2013/>> consulted in 7 May 2015

Museum of Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki in 2008, where it had already been merged with elements from the Costakis Collection and modern prints of period architectural photographs.²¹ The theme of the return of the lost father could hardly be more explicit. These three exhibitions were titled, sequentially, *Lost Vanguard* (Moscow), *Lost Vanguard: Soviet Modernist Architecture 1922-32* (New York), and *Lost Vanguard Found: Synthesis of Art and Architecture in Russia 1915-1935* (Thessaloniki). And as the series progressed, one notes how the contemporary photographic recovery of a lost architectural past came to be complemented with photographs produced in that past's present and even with that past's production in the visual arts. The full relevance of the inclusion of paintings will not be addressed now – how the separate bodies of a historiography of Soviet visual arts and one of architecture come together at a very specific time to form the larger and modified field of “the avant-garde” will be described later. We here simply note that the merging of different historiographical products, as the architectural photographs surely are insofar as they produce a narrative of and for architecture in their respective presents, is not entirely dissimilar to Hadid's display of her work next to Malevitch's, being, in a way, a historiographical version of it. The pairing here is of Pare's contemporary account of the “lost vanguard” with the “lost vanguard's” account of itself, bridging very much the same gap, making very much the same link, as Gmurzinska and Rastorfer do in the citation we previously used. The difference here is that the link is made with a degree of conceptual abstraction that is exactly one level above the case of Hadid – the empirical linking of historical objects here becomes the historical linking of historiographical objects.

Of the different works compiled in *Building the Revolution*, it is Richard Pare's photographs that must here be highlighted.²² Pare's extensive work had been in 2007 the object

²¹ This line-up is explicitly noted by the then President of the Royal Academy of Arts, Nicholas Grimshaw, in the exhibition guide for the 2012 RAA show. He does not mention dates, which are taken from the guide to the history of exhibitions at the Shchusev State Museum of Architecture published by the Museum in 2010, and the MoMA and Thessaloniki State Museum of Contemporary Art web archives. From:

<http://b1.culture.ru/c/282067/Putevoditel_Muar_12.10.pdf> consulted in 7 May 2015

<<http://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/47?locale=en>> consulted in 7 May 2015

<<http://www.greekstatemuseum.com/kmst/exhibitions/article/70.html>> consulted in 7 May 2015

²² While the exhibition of works from the Costakis collection itself is relevant, this was but the second showing of such material at both London and the Royal Academy of Arts. The first had taken place in 1983, having travelled the US the previous year, and had been covered extensively both by the book *Russian Avant-Garde Art: The George*

of a major publication, with an important contribution by Jean-Louis Cohen, in a book tied in with the exhibition it was meant to accompany, which had just arrived from Moscow to New York – *The Lost Vanguard: Russian Modernist Architecture 1922-32*. This collaboration between Pare and Cohen would extend to another major book, which would likewise accompany the London launch of the next, 2012 phase of this series of exhibitions, and again sharing its title with the exhibition itself – *Building the Revolution: Soviet Art and Architecture 1915-1935*, this time functioning as its catalogue.

Cohen's contribution to this second publication is noteworthy. Instead of the brief general history of the Soviet architectural "avant-garde" he had written for *The Lost Vanguard*, in *Building the Revolution* he instead presents us with a history of the interactions between the Soviet "avant-garde" and the Western ones. Titled *Uneasy Crossings: The Architecture of the Russian Avant-Garde between East and West*, his text opens, after the customary declaration of intentions and the inevitable celebration of Pare's work, with the following lines:

*"Earlier interpretations of a unique cycle of transformation in politics, culture and architecture have not been significantly altered by this new context [of increased access to Soviet materials after the perestroika], and need to be briefly mentioned."*²³

Cohen naturally then briefly mentions them, in his not significantly altering way, for a page and a half, to then start his careful chronicle of the "complex" and "labyrinthine" relations that are established from 1917 to 1941 between Western and Soviet architectural circles and movements, in both directions. Cohen tells of the impact of Soviet pavilions in Western exhibitions, and of how Soviet architectural experiments were disseminated in the West, through publications like Ehrenburg and El Lissitzky's trilingual *Veshch/Gegenstand/Objet*,

Costakis Collection, published between London and New York by Thames & Hudson and Harry N. Abrams in 1981, and by Christina Lodder's architects-directed article in the journal *Architectural Design* in 83 celebrating the RAA exhibition. See:

Angelica Zander RUDENSTINE (ed.), *Russian Avant-Garde Art: The George Costakis Collection*, Thames & Hudson/Harry N. Abrams, London and New York, 1981

Christina LODDER, "The Costakis Collection: New Insights into the Russian Avant-Garde", in *Architectural Design* Vol.53 Nr.5/6 (1983), pp.14-33

²³ Jean-Louis COHEN, "Uneasy Crossings: The Architecture of the Avant-Garde between East and West", in Tom NEVILLE, Vicky WILSON (Eds.), *Building the Revolution: Soviet Art and Architecture 1915-1935*, exhibition catalogue, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2011, p.13

Taut's *Frühlicht* and Le Corbusier's *L'Esprit Nouveau*, as well as later on in French journals such as *L'Architecture Vivante* or *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*. He tells how Soviet journals and publications regularly looked at German, French and American production, and how the Soviet construction industry used foreign expertise both at a technological level and at the architectural level, the former mainly from Germany and US based firms, the latter essentially from German ex-BAUHAUS exiles who came in militant architectural "brigades". He tells of Western visits to the USSR's world of art and architecture and their impressions, and of Western influences even in the critique of "constructivism" as it developed in the early 30s. Cohen's text is an interesting and valuable compilation of such relations, but, for our purposes, there is none more interesting and valuable than his final statement on how no early efforts in constructing a history of modern architecture managed to even acknowledge the Soviet "avant-garde":

*"The first Western narratives historicising Modern architecture were generally ignorant of Soviet production. If Henry-Russell Hitchcock reproduced Burov's set for [Eisenstein's] Old and New in his 1929 Modern Architecture: Romanticism and Reintegration [mistaking the movie set for a real building], Nikolaus Pevsner did not include any Russian building in his Pioneers of the Modern Movement of 1936, which celebrated the figure of Walter Gropius. Giedion's influential Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition of 1941 stopped at Germany's eastern border, and only in 1950 would Bruno Zevi mention some Russian works in his Storia dell'Architettura Moderna, essentially in order to construct a parallel with the architecture of Nazi Germany."*²⁴

Cohen had begun, in his declaration of intentions at the very start of the text, to explain how later historicisations of the Soviet "avant-garde" had been systematically constructed:

*"(...) as if it were a quasi-autonomous phenomenon. According to most interpretations, designs and buildings had apparently evolved in parallel to the chronicle of Western Architecture, but with minimal interaction between the two (...)"*²⁵

²⁴ Jean-Louis COHEN, "Uneasy Crossings: The Architecture of the Avant-Garde between East and West", in Tom NEVILLE, Vicky WILSON (Eds.), *Building the Revolution: Soviet Art and Architecture 1915-1935*, exhibition catalogue, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2011, p.21

²⁵ Jean-Louis COHEN, "Uneasy Crossings: The Architecture of the Avant-Garde between East and West", in Tom NEVILLE, Vicky WILSON (Eds.), *Building the Revolution: Soviet Art and Architecture 1915-1935*, exhibition catalogue, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2011, p.13

Indeed, he sees as his mission in this text to purge the historiography of modern architecture from this conception. What he misses, however, is “the historiographical link”.

And not only in this text. Cohen’s other, massive, 2012 publication, *The Future of Architecture Since 1889*, his own magnum opus of an attempt to re-write a comprehensive account of modern architecture, is probably the first, and to date only, volume of its kind to systemically include Soviet and socialist architecture in the general narrative. It has fundamental faults, faults that will not become apparent until later in this thesis, but that may be here briefly identified as being directly related to Cohen’s previously cited conviction that:

*“Earlier interpretations of a unique cycle of transformation in politics, culture and architecture have not been significantly altered by this new context (...)”*²⁶

In his division of the architectural future in 35 parts, Soviet architecture shows up in three: 13 - *Architecture and revolution in Russia*, where he describes early Soviet “modernisms”²⁷; 17 - *The spectrum of classicisms and traditionalisms*, where he mentions the late 30s-early 40s Soviet architecture in a context dominated by the implicit idea of “totalitarian” architecture, amidst Nazi and Italian examples, where only Auguste Perret and similars break the “totalitarian” connection but in their own separate sub-category of “modern classicism”; and finally, 27 - *Repression and diffusion of modernism*, where Cohen narrates the post-war Stalinist apex and Khrushchovite fall of “socialist-realism”. Since Soviet Architecture appears through the inclusion of chapters addressing it more or less chronologically in the middle of other chapters on Western architecture, one must point out Cohen is not terribly successful in mingling the two histories, with the all too notable exception of the chapter on “classicism and traditionalisms” which revolves around the all too familiar “totalitarian” connection he himself criticises in Zevi. Indeed, the text for *Building the Revolution* is more successful at bridging the gap, perhaps because it does not do so at the level of a history of architecture itself but at the level of a history of architectural culture, circles, and movements. It

²⁶ Jean-Louis COHEN, “Uneasy Crossings: The Architecture of the Avant-Garde between East and West”, in Tom NEVILLE, Vicky WILSON (Eds.), *Building the Revolution: Soviet Art and Architecture 1915-1935*, exhibition catalogue, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2011, p.13

²⁷ It’s relevant to note that Cohen often shies away from the explicit category of “the avant-garde”. He does not mention it once in this chapter. He barely uses it in his text for *The Lost Vanguard* (even though it figures prominently in the very title of the book in its anglicised form). He does use it much more freely in his text for *Building the Revolution*, including in the title of the text itself. This is probably the latest of these three works.

is hard to see Cohen's *Future of Architecture since 1889* as much more than a contemporary systematization of the canonical historiography of modern architecture as it has been established all the way from the Hitchcocks and Pevsners and Giedieons he mentions in the other, probably later text, with the chapters on Soviet architecture, similarly following the separate canonical historiography of it, inserted in the mix as if mortar injected between the bricks of a pre-existing historiographical edifice.

Architecture “in the middle”

One problem immediately pops up in this description. The “historiographical link” we see Cohen somewhat unsuccessfully chasing does not carry with it the characteristics previously identified in full. It is merely an attempt to produce a history of modern architecture that cohesively merges two separate historiographies, that of East and that of West, into one single narrative. We do not immediately identify an inherent link that bridges the gap between past and present as a mechanism of ideological redemption. Cohen aims at a simple, not-very-substantial, revision of the past, not at bringing it forth into the present.

Or that would be the first level of interpretation. The problem that by now is beginning to become clear, is that the bringing forth of the past into the present is an inherently historiographical effort, one which is built into the very practice of writing history. What this thesis will argue is that any Western revision of the historiography of Soviet and socialist architecture is intrinsically connected to a specific ideological re-construction – or perhaps better said re-production – of the Western present. The development of this historiography, of which Cohen is probably the most relevant contemporary example, tends towards a specific fusion of it with the historiography of architecture in the West, and as we have shown intuited through the example of Zaha Hadid's use of Malevich, tends also towards a de-historicisation of history specifically as it relates to the present, whether in how the past relates to the present or how the present itself is historicised. The historical development of this historiography, then, becomes the very development of “the historiographical link” in all its ideological, redeeming potential.

Jean-Louis Cohen is not a major producer of this historiography or of “the historiographical link”. He functions mostly as a compendium of the contemporary state of it. There is however one important moment when Cohen is of use to us. This happens in the same initial declaration of intentions of his text for *Building the Revolution*, right after the above quoted passage where he complains that the two histories have always been written in parallel, never meeting. He there mentions two exceptions. One is the exhibition held at Centre

Pompidou in Paris in 1978 titled *Paris-Moscou*. The other, which we shall now focus on, is the work of his former mentor, Manfredo Tafuri. Cohen addresses Tafuri specifically through the 1971 book *Socialismo, Città, Architettura URSS 1917-1937: Il Contributo degli Architetti Europei*, a study addressing the very same connections Cohen is in his text trying to trace. But this is not the sole contribution of Tafuri to the establishment of a single history of modern architecture which addresses both East and West. Indeed, most of his work to provide a critique of what is in Italy generally called “the modern movement” systematically takes into consideration the productions of Soviet architecture. We may safely place Tafuri at the origins of this effort in architectural history. At the very same time, we must also place him at the origins of the category of “the avant-garde” in the discipline of architecture as it is perceived today.

Jean-Louis Cohen’s apt pointing out of a French and an Italian reference, both from the 70s, is in itself telling of the general problems within which the historiography of Soviet architecture in the post-war West develops. The Soviet Union between the 50s and the 60s was at the height of its popularity in Western Europe. The USSR had effectively, and all but single-handedly, won the war against fascism, and the popular front policy of the Comintern had been instrumental in forming and coordinating resistance forces in the continent. National communist parties had emerged with unprecedented prestige and influence, and the growth of the Eastern Bloc seemed to bring back the promise of World revolution, an idea strengthened by the explosion of national liberation movements in European colonies over the globe. Contradictorily, however, the international power relations did not favour such a scenario, and the decisions of the Yalta Conference were strictly enforced by Soviet foreign policy, which guaranteed not to push for a further spread of proletarian revolution in Europe. This meant that the ideological ambiguities of the popular fronts of Dimitrov, which had brought together all the “lefts” against the fascist threat, and which still was the model for anti-colonial movements in Africa, Asia and South America, would be renewed in the European imperial centre in a peculiar form – while western communist parties and labour movements in general were now very strong and did not have to depend on other, non-revolutionary “lefts”, they were forbidden to pursue any actual revolutionary aims. This reality would be strengthened by Khrushchov’s policy of peaceful coexistence as it was defined in the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, and from then on, the parties and movements of the working class in the West were condemned to work within the limitations of an increasingly strong Social Democracy. Widespread welfare policies created, out of mainly administrative and intellectual workers, what is commonly referred to as “middle-classes”, in which context several different manifestations of what came to be called the “new left” emerged. Where the national

communist party and working class movement were strongest, this situation created serious tensions between the possibilities for action at a national level and the restrictions the international situation imposed. This was particularly noticeable precisely in the two countries Jean-Louis Cohen just pointed us to – France and Italy. These tensions would mount through the 60s, culminate in the crises of 68 and 69, last the 70s in Italy, and inevitably lead to the fragmentation of the revolutionary parties, the internalisation of social-democratic positions within the parties, and the eventual establishment, in 1977 by the French, Italian, and Spanish parties, of euro-communism, the European version of right-revisionism that still defines what remains of most European ex-communist parties and their participation, with the rest of the “new lefts”, in the construction of the political apparatus of the European Union.

It was during these years of political and ideological redefinition, between the 60s and the mid 70s, that the Western history and historiography of Soviet art and architecture, and indeed of the Soviet Union, was invented. While the development of an academic political and social history of the Soviet revolution and Union was led by E. H. Carr in England from 1950 onwards, the cultural history of it is first established almost entirely (if one allows for the exception of Camilla Gray) precisely in France and Italy. Italy is the place where the inaugural Western book on Soviet architecture is published, Vittorio De Feo's *URSS: Architettura 1917-1936* in 1963. Anatole Kopp in France, whose work would become the main international reference in the field, starts publishing in 67 with his *Ville et Révolution*. But while the French development is essentially a one man affair, the work in the field in Italy is a trend. This trend had already been established, before De Feo's book, in 1962, with issue 262 of the journal *Casabella Continuità*, entirely dedicated to Soviet architecture, the product of a visit to Russia organised by the Collegio degli Architetti di Milano in the previous year. From 64 onwards Vieri Quilici will curate in the journal *Rassegna Sovietica* a systematic translation of Soviet architectural texts, later compiled in his 1969 book *L'Architettura del Costruttivismo*. From then follows Paolo Ceccarelli's *La Costruzione della Città Sovietica 1929-31* in 1970, and Marco de Michelis' and Ernesto Pasini's *La Città Sovietica 1925-1937* together with Quilici's *Città Russa e Città Sovietica* in 1976. This work establishes a specifically Italian historiography of Soviet architecture. Unlike Kopp however, the Italian production is not very influential outside the borders of the country it is born in. It is rarely cited and mentioned in bibliographies, and the fundamental characteristic that distinguishes it from Kopp's narrative, namely its focus on the scale of the city, is generally not present in the broad Western historiography as it develops. Kopp, despite giving his book the title *Ville et Révolution*, does much more a history of architecture than of the city. He looks at the city from the point of view of architecture as building, not the other way around. The Italian production, conversely, has the city as its

principal object.²⁸ There is one similarity with Kopp that is of note – it comprises a historiographical narrative that exists, as Cohen puts it, in parallel to, and with minimal interaction with, the historiography of modern architecture in the West. One has no direct relation to the other and they don't really mix. With the notable exception of the work of Manfredo Tafuri.

Tafuri publishes what comprises his critique of “the modern movement” between 1968 and 1980. This is undoubtedly the most widely read phase of his work, and also both the most ambiguous and ambiguously read. His position evolved significantly over these militant years, and is tightly tied as much to the evolution of Italian politics as to the development of his career in the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia. He started teaching there in 68, the year he published his *Teorie e Storia dell'Architettura*. As chair of its Istituto di Storia dell'Architettura, he reformed it into the Dipartimento di Analisi, Critica e Storia dell'Architettura in 76, three years after he published his *Progetto e Utopia*. He reformed it back into the Dipartimento di Storia dell'Architettura in 82, two years after publishing his collection of essays *La Sfera e il Labirinto*. As can be intuited just from the transformations his departmental reforms impose on the name of the department, from history to history and criticism and back to simply history again, the central problem Tafuri is tackling throughout this period is that explicitly historiographical problem of the relation the present establishes with history. This problem has a particularly architectural version in the relation architectural design establishes with history, and indeed Tafuri was often read by his contemporaries, and by later readers, as spelling out how history brings about the doom of practice, missing the point that Tafuri's initial concern is the opposite – that history-as-facts must be rescued from a doom that is being ideologically imposed on it by practice. The structural tension between history and practice, or better said, the practice of history and the practice of design, sees a complicated theoretical development in Tafuri's critique during the time he publishes these three central works. The intricacies of this development are intrinsically linked to the problem at hand. The structural tension identified articulates itself through two fundamental categories - the historiographical category of “the avant-garde”, and the theoretical category of “the project”. And as Tafuri articulates this tension, the historiographies of Western and of early Soviet “avant-gardes” are entangled in each other in ways that require a detailed look.

²⁸ This argument, and its implications, will have further elaboration later, in Part III.

This is where Jean-Louis Cohen left us – with *Socialismo, Città, Architettura URSS 1917-1937: Il Contributo degli Architetti Europei*. This book appears in 1971, right in the middle of Tafuri's most quasi-Marxist moment, between the publication of *Per una Critica dell'Ideologia Architettonica* in the first issue of the neo-Marxist journal *Contropiano* in 1969, and the publication of the extended, book version of this article, *Progetto e Utopia* in 1973. This 1971 book has a distinctive advantage for us in that in it Tafuri deals with “the avant-garde” exclusively through its Soviet manifestations. While the book aims at being a series of accounts, by a series of authors, of the influences between Soviet and Western architects, Tafuri's specific contribution to it addresses, on the surface, none of these, and instead expands on the contradictions of “the avant-garde”, which have been and will continue to be the focus of his work, in the Soviet context. Titled *Il Socialismo Realizzato e la Crisi delle Avanguardie*, it looks at “the avant-garde” in a situation where the political implications of a significant section of it have been seemingly met. “Really existing socialism”, instead of making possible the aspirations of “the avant-garde”, ends up highlighting its internal contradictions. These become more easily perceivable, and the critique Tafuri makes of them more focused, probably because of the more specific historical boundaries within which he looks at them. It is a shame this text by Tafuri is today very marginal, for in it we find Tafuri at the height of his theoretical clarification, clarification that is needed in reading his relationship to “the avant-garde”, which is simultaneously that of a critic and that of a sympathizer.

Tafuri begins this text with the Russian “formalists” and ends it with the “constructivist” movement. In that sense, the text functions as a general history of the Soviet avant-garde and follows a more or less chronological setup. We are told how the “formalist” groups attempt to nullify the established relationships between linguistic form and meaning, and how that nullification functions through an application of the technique of “estrangement”:

*“Semantic estrangement, the divorce between sign and meaning, the creation of sign systems capable of bringing new meanings, they will ultimately reveal themselves to be tools for the struggle against the reified universe of the «everyday».”*²⁹

²⁹ Manfredo TAFURI, “Il Socialismo Realizzato e la Crisi delle Avanguardie”, in A. A. ROSA, Manfredo TAFURI et al, *Socialismo, Città, Architettura URSS 1917-1937: Il Contributo degli Architetti Europei*, Officina Edizioni, Rome, 1976, p.46

The potential of “formalist” analysis is then a “negative” one. But it’s important to note that “negative” in Tafuri is always good. The “negative” potential exists always as a theoretical critique of “positive” ideological practices. At this time the negation of aesthetic proposals as ideology is precisely the position Tafuri places himself in, and the position he tends to sympathise with in the architectural and aesthetic discourses of others. It tends to be associated with the destruction of inherent meanings we just saw him identify in the “formalist” groups, and it establishes a difficult relationship with “positive” proposals of transformation.³⁰ As one might expect, this “negative” potential of an aesthetic current in early Soviet Russia does not take place in architecture, but in the area between literature and linguistics that the “formalists”, both those of OPOJAZ³¹ and those of the Moscow Literature Circle, occupy. And indeed, most of Tafuri’s account has little architecture in it. Work into a historicisation of the Soviet “avant-garde” was in 71 just beginning in the West, even in Italy where that effort first developed. Tafuri’s access to detailed information on the history of this phase of Soviet architectural production was still scarce, and his resource to material on the broader fields of culture, art or aesthetics, in which Western research was more advanced, is not unique to him but common to most early architectural historiographical attempts. Not only is the first manifestation of “the avant-garde” addressed clearly within the realm of the written word, the last manifestation of it is Vladimir Tatlin’s utterly historicist, nonsensical attempt at being Leonardo Da Vinci, the 1932 Letatlin flying machine, rightfully presented as a final defeatist proposal of productivist ideology at a time when its contradictions had already been fully exposed. Architecture in this narrative happens somewhere “in the middle” of the two. While it would be easy to dismiss this as merely the product of the underdevelopment of Western historical research on the topic,

³⁰ Here this thesis refers exclusively to Tafuri’s first uses of the dialectic of the “positive” and the “negative” “avant-gardes”, within what we could call his 68-73 “critique of ideology” phase. Posterior developments of the understanding of this distinction, led by Tafuri and Cacciari, into a form of a “project” of “negative thought” that affirms itself explicitly as opposed to dialectics (even if a completely distorted understanding of dialectics). We will not in this thesis go into this broader problem, and will always use the categories of “positive” and “negative” as they were first used, as effectively a stand-in for “ideology” and “critique”, even if the critique reveals itself to be also ideological.

For an example of the later developments of this duality, see:

Massimo CACCIARI, *Architecture and Nihilism: on the Philosophy of Modern Architecture*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1993

³¹ Society for the Study of Poetic Language, based in Petrograd.

Tafuri is undoubtedly the foremost example of how this purely practical explanation does not suffice. For Tafuri, that “in the middle”, in not only a temporal but also a logical sense, is exactly where architecture belongs.

It is precisely based on the aporia lying between the “negative” potential of the “formalist” revolt of the object, and the development of a “positive” proposal for a proletarian culture, that architecture first rises as a heroic saviour and then meets its tragic demise. An aporia brought about by the ideological needs of the very revolution to which “the avant-garde” systematically professed eternal loyalty, and to which social and ideological structures it would systematically associate its own specific linguistic forms.

“It’s at this point that the attachment of formal analysis to the body of the historical avant-garde becomes problematic. (...)

The disagreement is revealed in its full extent when the avant-garde chooses to link its fate to the construction of the October Revolution. In other words, when it chooses for itself the dimension of the «project», when it transforms – in literature as in poetry, in architecture, in painting or in cinema – negation itself into constructive proposal, when it chooses, in short, to get down to the plane of history.”³²

“At this point, a difficulty rises. As long as the artist drives the «revolt of things» - the Mayakovskyan revolt of the objects – it becomes at least problematic to move from estrangement into production: the «estrangement» specific to a «culture of materials», like that of Tatlin, is, objectively, an estrangement of production.”³³

Tafuri can therefore establish a clear distinction between the first, “most rigorous”³⁴ phase of “formalism”, and its later developments into an ideology of production where the objects, having achieved their revolt from meaning, are freely re-organised by an artist that is no

³² Manfredo TAFURI, “Il Socialismo Realizzato e la Crisi delle Avanguardie”, in A. A. ROSA, Manfredo TAFURI et al, *Socialismo, Città, Architettura URSS 1917-1937: Il Contributo degli Architetti Europei*, Officina Edizioni, Rome, 1976, pp.43-44

³³ Manfredo TAFURI, “Il Socialismo Realizzato e la Crisi delle Avanguardie”, in A. A. ROSA, Manfredo TAFURI et al, *Socialismo, Città, Architettura URSS 1917-1937: Il Contributo degli Architetti Europei*, Officina Edizioni, Rome, 1976, pp.45-46

³⁴ Manfredo TAFURI, “Il Socialismo Realizzato e la Crisi delle Avanguardie”, in A. A. ROSA, Manfredo TAFURI et al, *Socialismo, Città, Architettura URSS 1917-1937: Il Contributo degli Architetti Europei*, Officina Edizioni, Rome, 1976, p.52

more than an “*engineer of formal combinations*”.³⁵ Only at this moment, when “the avant-garde” attempts to extract the “positive” “project” out of the “negative” analysis, when the theoretical negation of meaning becomes the ideological effort to produce new meanings, does architecture enter the fray. Tafuri does not explicitly address this in this text – he had already done it quite clearly, two years earlier in 1969, in *Per una Critica dell’Ideologia Architettonica*:

*“It was at this point that architecture was able to enter the scene, by absorbing and overcoming all the demands of the historic avant-gardes – and indeed by throwing them all into crisis, since architecture alone was in a position to provide real answers to the demands made by Cubism, Futurism, Dada, De Stijl, and all the various Constructivisms and Productivisms.”*³⁶

Indeed, the closer to “the project” “the avant-garde” comes the more architectural it gets. This should not be surprising, as it permeates the entirety of the post-60s understanding of the development of the early 20th century “avant-garde”, and especially of what is commonly called “constructivism”. Architecture is frequently seen, and with good reason, as the discipline that naturally places itself at the apex of the cultural pyramid at the time when “avant-garde” culture has defined for itself the task of transforming the material world of the social. We can see this already in Camilla Gray’s pioneering work in the field, *The Russian Experiment in Art* from 1962, where even though architecture is mostly an afterthought, it shows up as a direct consequence of the ideology of “productivism”, morphed into functionalist industrial design, morphed into the:

*“(…) militant constructivist’s doctrinaire [which] ideas were more all-embracing and led naturally to architecture.”*³⁷

³⁵ Manfredo TAFURI, “Il Socialismo Realizzato e la Crisi delle Avanguardie”, in A. A. ROSA, Manfredo TAFURI et al, *Socialismo, Città, Architettura URSS 1917-1937: Il Contributo degli Architetti Europei*, Officina Edizioni, Rome, 1976, p.45

³⁶ This text by Tafuri, first published in the first issue of the Italian political journal *Contropiano*, is widely known and dispenses introductions. I use here the English translation provided in the anthology of texts edited by K. Michael Hays, in which it takes first spot. Especially because the anthology announces itself to be “since 1968”, and this first text in it dates from 1969, it is not hard to see that it effectively proposes that Tafuri – who had indeed published in 1968 his *Theories and History of Architecture*, a work too large to fit into Hays’ format – is the foundational stone for a new phase of architectural criticism developing after a date which definition can only be political.

Manfredo TAFURI, “Toward a Critique of Architectural Ideology”, in K. Michael Hays (Ed.), *Architecture Theory since 1968*, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts and London, 2000, p.20

³⁷ Camilla GRAY, *The Russian Experiment in Art 1863-1922*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2000, p.264

Stephen Bann too addresses the notion in 1974 in his introduction to *The Tradition of Constructivism*, just three years after this text by Tafuri but with no discernible direct relation.³⁸ When talking about what he dubs “international constructivism” and its conflicted position between the development of a new art and the “functionalist” destruction of art itself, he personifies its ideology in the specific figure of Theo Van Doesburg, who had been since 1923:

“(...) directing his ultimate aims toward an architectural resolution”³⁹

Indeed Bann’s text builds up through the visual arts to a section where architecture reigns supreme, and that is where the historical development of “constructivism” in the inter-wars period ends. Further examples of this argument are as plentiful as the number of works attempting to address the origins of “constructivist” or “avant-garde” architecture in the Soviet Union up till the mid 1930s. These two foundational works serve here only to establish that this is an argument that precedes and exists generally apart from Tafuri. The most historically relevant architectural example of it is probably the work of Selim O. Khan-Magomedov published mainly during the 80s. The most developed and influential form of the argument can also be placed between the mid 80s and early 90s, at the moment the historiography of “the avant-garde” is firmly established in the Anglo-Saxon architectural world, a moment that starts what we have earlier defined as the second historiographical phase of the Western historiography of Soviet architecture and best condensed in the already mentioned string of special issues of *A.D.* guest-edited by Catherine Cooke.

The useful innovation of Tafuri here is not the general layout of the origin story of “avant-garde” architecture in Russia, as the natural evolution of a politically minded, wanting to be socially-operative, broad field of the arts, or of what we might even more broadly call culture. As stated, for Tafuri architecture lies “in the middle” of two crucial historical moments, not only rising, but also, and more interestingly, falling, and Tafuri’s account of the fall is where we must first focus. In the vast majority of historiographical narratives of “the avant-garde”,

³⁸ Bann makes no mention of this book, citing in fact only one among the four important and pioneering Italian works on Soviet architecture available to him at the time. This does not necessarily mean English speaking circles had little contact with Italian materials, since Bann uses the Milan based journal *L’Arte Moderna*. Even if this hypothesis is generally likely, more relevant than that is probably the significant distance between the field of the visual arts in which Bann mainly moves and that of architecture.

³⁹ Stephen BANN (Ed.), *The Tradition of Constructivism*, Da Capo Press, New York, 1974, p.XL

architecture always rises from the visual arts or literature, but it never falls in the same way. Its existence is not so much “in the middle” as it is the culmination of a process. The reason “avant-garde” architecture ends comes entirely from outside and has nothing to do with its internal development – essentially, as in Heym, Stalin kills it (or sends it to Siberia)⁴⁰. While architecture’s rise is the evolution of “the avant-garde” at the time when its commitment to the positive “project” is at its strongest, its fall is purely political, and “socialist realism” replaces “the avant-garde” *tout-court*. This is where Tafuri comes up with an alternative. Let us go through his account of the historical development of “the avant-garde”, for even his origin story is presented in terms that are quite different from the usual ones:

*“The Soviet avant-garde in particular (...) tends to establish a new type of control over a reality recognised as contradictory, not subjectable to any formal a priori: but to achieve this one must understand that it is no longer the subject that defines reality, but reality that defines the subject.”*⁴¹

“(...) it would be wrong to fully believe the scientific claims formalism makes in its most rigorous phase. Even that stubborn and polemical digging through the fundamental structures of form, with no other apparent purpose than the demonstration of the fundamental tautologicalness of art, turned out to be an artistic «project». The distance between the analyst and the work was naught but a pretext: (...) formalism projected in reality the recovery of a specific quality for intellectual labour (...)

*(...) the difficulties, in Soviet Russia, are accentuated by the fact that the dialectics internal to intellectual labour and to its clash with a labour that is fully homogenised, abstract, lacking quality, directly productive, insist on the irrepressible fact of the Revolution of 1917.”*⁴²

⁴⁰ Heym’s story of “modernism” frozen in Siberia for 20 years, as personified in the character of Daniel Wollin, could have been a particularly interesting one given the widespread use of “modernist” planning models in the construction of industrial new towns East of the Urals throughout the first few five-year plans. This will be an idea we return to later.

⁴¹ Manfredo TAFURI, “Il Socialismo Realizzato e la Crisi delle Avanguardie”, in A. A. ROSA, Manfredo TAFURI et al, *Socialismo, Città, Architettura URSS 1917-1937: Il Contributo degli Architetti Europei*, Officina Edizioni, Rome, 1976, p.50

⁴² Manfredo TAFURI, “Il Socialismo Realizzato e la Crisi delle Avanguardie”, in A. A. ROSA, Manfredo TAFURI et al, *Socialismo, Città, Architettura URSS 1917-1937: Il Contributo degli Architetti Europei*, Officina Edizioni, Rome, 1976, p.52

“The quality experimented in the work entirely on form must now move into the processes of «socialisation»: the verbal rejection of the cultural aristocracy is entirely functional to the polemic the intellectual now wages with itself.”⁴³

So the first “avant-garde” that is “formalism” becomes deadlocked in the historical conundrum of its own revolutionary dissolution of any essential specificity to intellectual labour. The crypto-materialist realisation that the construction of ideas does not shape the world but is instead shaped by it simultaneously opens the window of language to the formalist critique of meaning and closes the door of material reality to the possibility of such critique having significant operative consequences to its definition.⁴⁴ In short, a materialist theory of language becomes possible, and “the project” becomes impossible. As a consequence, the traditional position of the cultural intellectual in bourgeois society is exposed as that of a producer of ideology, and the artist then sees its position in socialism as standing on impossible ground. To overcome such impossibility, “the avant-garde” can do nothing but return to the ideological reconstruction of a new essential specificity. This reconstruction is naught but “the avant-garde” form of “the project”.

“The avant-garde” is therefore trapped in the obsolescence it made for itself. It is at the same time part of the theoretical consciousness of the revolution and one of its direct victims. This contradiction can only be overcome through the self-awareness of that which Gramsci calls the “organic intellectual”.⁴⁵ But that is not yet possible for the agents of “the avant-garde” –

⁴³ Manfredo TAFURI, “Il Socialismo Realizzato e la Crisi delle Avanguardie”, in A. A. ROSA, Manfredo TAFURI et al, *Socialismo, Città, Architettura URSS 1917-1937: Il Contributo degli Architetti Europei*, Officina Edizioni, Rome, 1976, p.53

⁴⁴ This formulation is obviously excessively mechanical – hence being presented as crypto-materialist. A proper materialist formulation must acknowledge the dialectics between the two – the material world shapes ideas, but is also shaped by them, since ideas in turn shape human action over the world, therefore shaping the world. This basic philosophical mistake is the ground on which Tafuri will build his historiographical ambiguities, as will be accounted for later.

⁴⁵ The “organic intellectual” is the intellectual who perceives himself as linked to a given class’ interests, therefore abandoning the notion of the possibility of intellectual production outside and above material social conditions. It is naturally associated specifically with the working class because only that class’ ideology is not contradictory with a materialist theory of labour. Traditional intellectuals in bourgeois societies will never see themselves as linked to the interests of the bourgeoisie, but always to that of higher supra-social values such as rationality or an essential truth. For this, see Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*.

even if they try – who are still ideologically constrained to require that essential specificity, that quality.

*“It would be wrong to consider that, from the 20s onwards, the game of the avant-garde is done: it has simply moved past its own purposes. The strangeness of the bourgeois institutions to the fate of the proletariat legitimises the declaration of death to the fetishism of artistic values, gives a political basis to the traditional destructive role of the historical avant-garde. The war on «eternal and incorruptible truths» is merely the dialectic pole of the wholly ideological reconstruction of the supra-historical role of the discipline (...)”*⁴⁶

“Giving to the proletariat the historical task of returning man to himself and to its social environment, the recovery of a labour made sacred again, as it is no longer alienated, is directly translated into an ideology of organisation, into the Plan. (...)

*(...) The «communist city» (...) is the specific place of the social manifestation of the Plan.”*⁴⁷

Here Tafuri directly addresses how architecture is the culmination of “the avant-garde”. What he says does not so much contradict other versions like Gray’s or Bann’s as it takes them a step further, theorising the contradictions inherent to “the avant-garde” in a way that they could not. This then enables Tafuri to address the fall of “the avant-garde”, which is also inevitably the fall of architecture, in a radically different way, for these very contradictions are what render it impossible.

*“The extinction of the division of labour, the end of worker alienation, the restoration of the concept of human totality, can be «achieved» only as images. (...) the «commune-houses» or the «disurbanist» theory are naught but technicised propaganda. And, furthermore, propaganda devoid of commitment, desperately aimed at creating a commitment, aimed at justifying with the appearance of pure technical contribution the autonomy of social projection itself.”*⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Manfredo TAFURI, “Il Socialismo Realizzato e la Crisi delle Avanguardie”, in A. A. ROSA, Manfredo TAFURI et al, *Socialismo, Città, Architettura URSS 1917-1937: Il Contributo degli Architetti Europei*, Officina Edizioni, Rome, 1976, p.57

⁴⁷ Manfredo TAFURI, “Il Socialismo Realizzato e la Crisi delle Avanguardie”, in A. A. ROSA, Manfredo TAFURI et al, *Socialismo, Città, Architettura URSS 1917-1937: Il Contributo degli Architetti Europei*, Officina Edizioni, Rome, 1976, p.58

⁴⁸ Manfredo TAFURI, “Il Socialismo Realizzato e la Crisi delle Avanguardie”, in A. A. ROSA, Manfredo TAFURI et al, *Socialismo, Città, Architettura URSS 1917-1937: Il Contributo degli Architetti Europei*, Officina Edizioni, Rome, 1976, p.63

“That is to say, for intellectual labour to keep unchanged its own role as conscience of the world, as prophetic anticipator, as manager of the ethical ends of humanity.”⁴⁹

“One single step forward and we get the Letatlin (...). The Letatlin has everything: the mystique of the machine and the instance of a «human» control over it, the tension towards the future and the plunge into the archaic, the productive eagerness and the recovery of an unbridgeable distance from production. But it has, mainly, the realisation of the outdatedness of such avant-garde.”⁵⁰

And so architecture, the ultimate form of “the avant-garde”, is defeated. Its dreams are no more capable of flight than Tatlin’s contraption, to which it regresses. Just as actual aircraft owe little to Tatlin, so does the actual development of a socialist society and planned economy care little for the flights of fancy of “the avant-garde” and its “ideology of planning”.⁵¹ Not because its promise of ultimate liberation conflicted with the political establishment of a totalitarian regime, but because such liberation was but an image that concealed naught but the permanence of a bourgeois notion of culture and the cultural agent as supra-political entities.

“The return of art to itself and its real demise, verifiable in all the more significant experiments of soviet architecture in the threshold of the 30s, has absolutely nothing of «heroic», nothing imposed from the outside.”⁵²

This position is radically distinct from most on this matter. And this remains true not only in regard to those of the same period, but up till today. The consequences of this become apparent if we go back a bit to Jean-Louis Cohen, and his not significantly altered history of the Soviet “avant-garde” as mortar to the edifice of the historiography of “modernism”. For in

⁴⁹ Manfredo TAFURI, “Il Socialismo Realizzato e la Crisi delle Avanguardie”, in A. A. ROSA, Manfredo TAFURI et al, *Socialismo, Città, Architettura URSS 1917-1937: Il Contributo degli Architetti Europei*, Officina Edizioni, Rome, 1976, p.64

⁵⁰ Manfredo TAFURI, “Il Socialismo Realizzato e la Crisi delle Avanguardie”, in A. A. ROSA, Manfredo TAFURI et al, *Socialismo, Città, Architettura URSS 1917-1937: Il Contributo degli Architetti Europei*, Officina Edizioni, Rome, 1976, p.69

⁵¹ In this Tafuri is incorrect, for real planning did use the contributions of “the avant-garde”. Clarifying how is a type of historiographical correction that is not, however, the point of this thesis. The thesis will merely indicate some pointers to it in the Epilogue.

⁵² Manfredo TAFURI, “Il Socialismo Realizzato e la Crisi delle Avanguardie”, in A. A. ROSA, Manfredo TAFURI et al, *Socialismo, Città, Architettura URSS 1917-1937: Il Contributo degli Architetti Europei*, Officina Edizioni, Rome, 1976, p.71

Tafuri, after dealing with the Soviet “avant-garde”, the whole historiography of “modernism” can no longer remain the same, and the whole “avant-garde” must be judged in the light of the same contradictions Tafuri successfully addresses in this text.

*“It is not by chance that German, Dutch or Czechoslovakian «radical» architects come to see in Soviet Russia the country of realised utopia, the chosen place for the organisation of development, the specific field of application where it is possible to act out the dream of the recovery of an intellectual labour that is rescued in its role of guide – both ethical and technical – of the Civilisation machiniste.”*⁵³

How “the avant-garde”, the whole borderless body of it, becomes crucially redefined in the context of this largely forgotten text depends entirely on the tale of the fall of “the avant-garde” under the weight of its own contradictions. As we should be reminded, this places architecture itself as a discipline as something that happens squarely “in the middle”, a “middle” chronologically defined by the sequence of events between linguistics/visual arts and flying machines; logically defined between utopian promise and the confrontation with hard reality; and narratively defined in the text itself between a start with no architecture and an ending similarly void of it. In Tafuri this “in the middle” is then aggressively defined, mostly because he is the only one who addresses the fall of architecture together with that of “the avant-garde” in terms as profound as he addresses its rise. This can be easily perceived by comparison, again, with Stephen Bann, where the “in the middle” position can also be easily felt because he attempts to extend the “tradition of constructivism” after its Soviet death into his present via Western currents in the visual arts, in what constitutes his own version of “the historiographical link”. It is quite clear in his introduction that architecture disappears entirely from the field as “constructivism” encroaches on the present, but this disappearance is never really addressed, probably since Bann wasn’t really very interested in architecture to begin with. But it is precisely because of the complete absence of architecture in the later quarter of his book that his presentation of American “structurism” or the French centred “nouvelle tendance” as the heirs to a “tradition of constructivism” that starts in Soviet Russia is unconvincing in the context of this macro-narrative. For the ambition to operate directly on the material of social life itself, the

⁵³ Manfredo TAFURI, “Il Socialismo Realizzato e la Crisi delle Avanguardie”, in A. A. ROSA, Manfredo TAFURI et al, *Socialismo, Città, Architettura URSS 1917-1937: Il Contributo degli Architetti Europei*, Officina Edizioni, Rome, 1976, p.60

steady amplification of “composition” into an ever more universal principle of “organisation”, a tendency Bann registers clearly, suddenly vanishes after the war, at the same time the central axis Moscow-Berlin is replaced by the axis Paris-New York as the geo-political space where Bann’s historiography sees “constructivism” operating. The reasons why this historical tendency ceases to be a central characteristic of the “tradition” are not present, and even when Bann shows how the debate between what he calls “constructivism” and “functionalism” persists in a different shape, the problem of “organisation”, especially “organisation” of production, has quite clearly returned to a pre-“constructivist” condition of, at best, “organisation” of perception, at worst, “representation”. Bann’s use of “constructivism” vs “functionalism” as his central categorical duality, where the latter kills off art and replaces it with what is essentially either journalism or engineering, and the former produces an art that is founded on the new material conditions but maintains a specific disciplinary autonomy, shows itself problematic since it fails to account for this dramatic change, and indeed seems to produce more historiographical murkiness than clarification. This duality is the conceptual mechanism through which Bann is able to produce his “historiographical link” by transcending the common periodisation of “constructivism” strictly within the inter-wars period, because it enables him to discard the development of what we have seen Tafuri define as an “ideology of organisation” as being central to it. And it also entangles him in an impossible net of aesthetic categories of which continuous transformations he seems to be oblivious. This is most evident precisely when Bann addresses architecture, when the rival groups ASNOVA (Association of New Architects) and OSA (Union of Contemporary Architects) in the Soviet late 20s and early 30s are identified as respectively “functionalist” and “constructivist”, while in the Bauhaus the direction of Hannes Meyer had been “functionalist” while that of Mies van der Rohe returned to a more balanced set of principles closer to those of “constructivism”. The problems with this categorization are evident to anyone aware of the particulars of these debates, since it is precisely ASNOVA that tries to maintain a greater level of autonomy for the art where OSA focuses on architecture as technical and social engineering. On top of this, Hannes Meyer’s positions are much closer to OSA than to ASNOVA⁵⁴. Indeed to keep his definition of the two categories consistent over time, using them in regards to both Central Europe in the early 20s and Russia in the late 20s and early 30s, Bann would be required to, arbitrarily in any one of the

⁵⁴ So much closer, in fact, that upon migrating to the Soviet Union with his brigade, he would come to join neither of the two, but the later VOPRA, which extended the accusations OSA laid against ASNOVA to OSA itself.

two contexts, completely reverse them. This of course would produce problems of its own since the movements and trends do often self-identify with the terms. Why Bann is so completely entangled in this web in a way that makes him commit obvious empirical errors one after the other in his use of “isms”, can, at a surface level, be explained by the lack of access he had at the time to historical sources, or to a relative distance from the field of architecture. But just as we did with Tafuri in the beginning of this section when we upheld that practical reasons of this kind are insufficient to understand the relative lack of architecture in the text, in Bann too we can speculate about, through the lens of Tafuri’s contribution, how this systemic misunderstanding of the web of categories he uses is important to him at a deeper level. For Bann the fundamental duality needs to be “functionalism” vs “constructivism” precisely so that he may elevate “constructivism” as the “more balanced” position, as the position that preserves the primacy of art and culture as autonomous fields, in short, as the position that saves his own self as an ideological agent with delusions of supra-historicity in his own, post-war, Western, bourgeois reality.

Here we have “the historiographical link” suddenly appearing in its full splendour. What in the inter-wars period could be achieved in the realm of aesthetic discourse itself – the ideological rescue of intellectual labour, in the figure of the cultural agent, as the carrier of an essential specificity, of that “quality” manifested in “the project” – can in the post-war period, when politics itself has been depoliticised under the terms of “democracy” vs “totalitarianism”, be achieved only through history. And so does Bann grab “constructivism” from the past, and so does he dress it in the garb of tradition, and so does he bring it forth unto his present to redeem the intellectual from the loss of that “quality” of culture that hovers, like a spectre, over Europe and the bourgeois world. “The project” becomes history becomes culture. Politics is depoliticised. History is de-historicised. And culture again becomes the messiah of a post-political, post-historical, probably post-fordist, and certainly post-modern salvation.

“Negative” in form, “positive” in content

So “the historiographical link” and “the project” now reveal themselves to be two versions of the same ideological practice. This is manifested in Bann through his duality “functionalism” vs “constructivism”, in which the latter is extended towards the present and made a “tradition”. The problem then is about how historiographical categories are used. Overcoming the problem requires the realization that the two categories do not exist objectively in and of themselves, and that rigidly adhering to them as they come from historical sources is wholly insufficient to understanding the dynamics of the debate being scrutinised.

Tafuri does this. Not so much in the sense that he puts into question the categories themselves – indeed he seems to be even less rigorous with them than Bann, “constructivism” frequently serving as an all-embracing term for the period while at the same time it is a specific trend within it – but in the sense that he distances himself from such confrontation to focus on another one that exists at a higher level. Tafuri addresses the first confrontation in the following terms:

“[moving from formal analysis to the «project»] places almost insoluble problems: Soviet constructivism will perpetually oscillate between an architecture that is strange to the everyday – the researches of Melnikov and the Golosovs – and an architecture in a positive dialectic with it: mainly the researches of Ginzburg, or of Burov.”⁵⁵

“One can assume that their [of formalists and constructivists] ends are immediately opposed, but they can also converge. For the formalists – those of OPOJAZ or later the architects of ASNOVA and ARU – it’s about safeguarding a minimal area of absolute control over the discipline; for the «Marxist» critique [constructivism] it’s about the permanent consolidation of ideologies, in their various technical expressions, for the general ideological re-organisation operating in the USSR after 24.”⁵⁶

“(…) the answer lies entirely in the false alternative between the formal school and «Marxist aesthetics». Advancing a Marxist theory of art, ignoring that from a class based perspective there is no alternative other than a Marxist critique of linguistic institutions, the way will be opened to the ambiguous integration of analytical formalism into the methods of formal production.”⁵⁷

We can see here that what Tafuri calls “formalism” is the same historical object in architecture that Bann calls “functionalism”, which one can easily take to mean the exact opposite. But let us not dwell on that now, since the tension between these two terms will be

⁵⁵ Manfredo TAFURI, “Il Socialismo Realizzato e la Crisi delle Avanguardie”, in A. A. ROSA, Manfredo TAFURI et al, *Socialismo, Città, Architettura URSS 1917-1937: Il Contributo degli Architetti Europei*, Officina Edizioni, Rome, 1976, p.47

⁵⁶ Manfredo TAFURI, “Il Socialismo Realizzato e la Crisi delle Avanguardie”, in A. A. ROSA, Manfredo TAFURI et al, *Socialismo, Città, Architettura URSS 1917-1937: Il Contributo degli Architetti Europei*, Officina Edizioni, Rome, 1976, pp.48-49

⁵⁷ Manfredo TAFURI, “Il Socialismo Realizzato e la Crisi delle Avanguardie”, in A. A. ROSA, Manfredo TAFURI et al, *Socialismo, Città, Architettura URSS 1917-1937: Il Contributo degli Architetti Europei*, Officina Edizioni, Rome, 1976, pp.49-50

addressed at length later. The fundamental idea we should at this time take from Tafuri's formulation is that the two positions:

a) Both historically exist in the same problematic space defined by the impossibility of converting formal theory into scientific practice in an ideologically defined field. Doing so would imply a conflation of theory and ideology, two mutually exclusive modes of perceiving reality. Such conflation can be nothing but the submission of theory to ideology, its practice condensed in the concept of "the project", fusing consciousness and conscience in the image of a pseudo-materialist Jiminy cricket;

b) Are simultaneously associated with the distinction between the "negative" theory and the "positive" "project" in such a way that "formalism" belongs to the former and "constructivism" to the latter.

This creates a difficult situation. "Formalism" then is anti-"project" yet historically tends towards it, a contradiction manifested even at the micro-scale of the categorisation of specific historical figures. Melnikov here belongs to "constructivism" in the first cited paragraph, but having been associated to ASNOVA belongs to "formalism" in the second one, which could easily be identified as an error. It would be hard to argue in this case that such error is due to the lack of access to material which Tafuri was forced to work with, since it seems unlikely that he was not well aware of Melnikov's history as the single most successful professional architect with ASNOVA connections.⁵⁸ For the professional historian, this would constitute a conundrum in judging Tafuri's competence on the subject. Fortunately, there is an alternative explanation, which is much more useful.

The division Tafuri identifies as existing within "constructivism" in the first cited paragraph is the same division Bann sees between it and "functionalism", and also the same division Tafuri sees between it and "formalism" in the second cited paragraph. These categories must therefore be seen as something that is not static, but historically changes. Tafuri does make an explicit distinction between the first, "*most rigorous*" phase of "formalism", and its later developments into an ideology of production. This distinction supersedes the distinction between "formalism" and "constructivism", since between the latter, and the later manifestations of the former, the difference is shown to be superficial. The distinction that matters to him is the one between "negative" criticism and "positive" ideology that we

⁵⁸ And probably the single most successful professional architect of the whole period, if success is measured by actually having things built.

identified in the previous chapter. This distinction becomes an overarching one that cleaves “the avant-garde” in two. We can identify in Tafuri two terms for these two “avant-gardes”: these are the “negative avant-garde” and the “historical avant-garde”. The “negative avant-garde” is, in short, the one he likes and with which he will establish a relation of continuously ambiguous sympathy throughout his work all the way to his writings on the Italian Renaissance. The “historical avant-garde” is, in short, the one he attacks and against which he will develop most of his critique of the “modern movement” that dominates his work till *La Sfera e il Labirinto*. This distinction is absolutely crucial in understanding the radical contribution of Tafuri in regards to a historiography of “the avant-garde”, but also the structural ambiguity of his position, an ambiguity that will inevitably lead towards yet another version of “the historiographical link”, as we will later see.

There are two problems with the placement of this distinction as central:

The first, and most apparent even to someone who is not familiar with Tafuri’s work, is that the definition of the “historical avant-garde” seems to be mostly a matter of periodisation. And indeed, it is. Tafuri’s chief concern that transpires through the usage of this term is the distinction between “the avant-garde” of a particular period, that of the inter-wars period – and even more specifically up till the 1930s, a date that is dressed with particular relevance in Tafuri’s formulation⁵⁹ – and other “avant-gardes”. Indeed, this is mostly the difference between that which everyone agrees to call “the avant-garde” – the generalised consensus on the use of the term – and other possible uses of the term Tafuri addresses.

The second problem, and one that does require a degree of familiarity with Tafuri’s argument, is his explanation of how the two “avant-gardes”, the one that negates and the one that proposes, end up being interlocked in a cycle of one turning into its opposite. We will start with the second one. Gail Day makes a concise explanation of that articulation, in her 2005 article for *Radical Philosophy*, titled *Strategies in the Metropolitan Merz: Manfredo Tafuri and Italian Workerism*:

“Tafuri turns inside-out the established distinction between «constructive» and «destructive» avant-gardes, showing how each tendency (...) transformed into its opposite.”

⁵⁹ Since it is the date when real planning comes into play, be it Keynesian planning in capitalism or the planned economy of “really existing socialism”.

“In this «dialectic of the avant-garde», as Tafuri called it, positive becomes negative and negative becomes positive, unravelling the discursive parameters of so much modern art history.”⁶⁰

Between these two extracts, Day describes this dialectic of the two currents, typified by De Stijl and Dada. To summarise and expand her description, De Stijl’s “constructivism”,⁶¹ while aiming at the construction of a new unity for the new industrial order (that essential “quality”) delved into ever deeper linguistic experiments that ultimately resulted in the fragmentation of form and its classical “wholeness”. Dada, while radically trying to destroy the artistic institution through the atomisation of its “wholeness” into a nonsensical assemblage of parts, ended up in fact embracing the classical principle of mimesis by representing the perceived chaotic nature of industrial capitalist reality, and more, imbuing that chaos itself with enough meaning to make it the new “wholeness”.⁶²

Indeed, this argument is present throughout Tafuri’s work, remaining essentially unaltered since *Teorie e Storia* in 1968 to *La Sfera e il Labirinto* in 1980 (Day identifies it in *Progetto e Utopia*). It would then seem that the structural distinction between the “positive” and the “negative” “avant-gardes” is not quite so structural after all, for they both are but two sides of the same proverbial coin that is the “historical avant-garde”, as it struggled to establish itself up to the 20s and to survive after the 30s. And yet, we must immediately perceive in Day’s excellent summary a crucial coincidence: for the “negative”, or the “destructive” in her formulation, appears tendentially within the realm of form, and the “positive” within the realm of content. In both cases, the “wholeness” of meaning interacts, in inverse directions, with the fragmentation of the unity of form. Even Dada’s embrace of non-meaning stands revealed, through Tafuri’s scrutiny, as a nihilistic version of its restoration. It reminds us of Lukács’ 1957

⁶⁰ Gail DAY, “Strategies in the Metropolitan Merz: Manfredo Tafuri and Italian Workerism”, in *Radical Philosophy* Nr.133 (Sep-Oct 2005), pp.29

⁶¹ “Constructivism” is here interestingly associated with the use of the term “constructive avant-garde” for what we are calling, and Tafuri tend to identify as, the “positive avant-garde”, that of the “project”. Just one more small example of how historiographical categories can define theoretical associations.

⁶² A full description and demonstration of this element of Tafuri’s reading of “the avant-garde” would easily take a chapter all by itself. Here Gail Day is used as a shortcut so as to avoid such a chapter being required, especially since, of the general reading made in this thesis of the status of “the avant-garde” in Tafuri as a particularly representative case of the conflicted nature of the category, this particular element is probably the most consensual.

denunciation of Kafka, and of what he calls “modernism” as a whole, as a religious form of atheism:

*“Kafka (...) is an atheist. An atheist, though, of that modern species who regard God’s removal from the scene not as a liberation (...) but as a token of the «God-forsakenness» of the world (...). Modern religious atheism is characterised, on the one hand, by the fact that unbelief has lost its revolutionary élan – the empty heavens are the projection of a world beyond hope of redemption. On the other hand, religious atheism shows that the desire for salvation lives on with undiminished force in a world without God, worshipping the void created by God’s absence.”*⁶³

The “positive avant-garde” aims at salvation but ends up, in the process of constructing the path towards it, stuck in the mire of contradictory reality, while the “negative avant-garde” embraces such contradictions only to turn them into a new path to the same salvation. Where both the “avant-gardes” cannot negate “Wholeness” but in the realm of form, Tafuri aims to elevate such negation to the realm of content, doing away with salvation entirely.

This is where the problem of periodisation becomes crucial. For indeed the “historical avant-garde” comprises these two “avant-gardes” where they remain locked in the “negation” in form, “project” in content conundrum. Essentially, they are, in fact, both “positive”. Both of them, to use the same citation of the previous chapter:

*“(...) choose for [themselves] the dimension of the «project», (...) transform (...) negation itself into constructive proposal, (...) in short, (...) get down to the plane of history.”*⁶⁴

They both get down to the plane of history, of operative historical change achieved through cultural agency. And so we have the “historical avant-garde” revealed fully, both as

⁶³ Georg LUKÁCS, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, Merlin Press, London, 1972, p.44

Lukács does this after a detailed analysis of the forms of “modernist” literature, where he presents it as essentially naturalistic, i.e., having a static understanding of reality, as opposed to realistic, i.e., perceiving reality’s dialectic structures of change. He particularly notes “modernism’s” subjective use of empiric detail as a mechanism of mimetic representation of the insurmountable chaotic nature of the real, whether it be in Kafka, Beckett or Joyce, while the use of the same detail can be done so as to present it as the construction of types, merging the particular with the general and therefore representing not reality’s empiric chaos but its graspable structures, in “realist” literature, including bourgeois “critical realism”, of which Thomas Mann is his hero.

⁶⁴ Manfredo TAFURI, “Il Socialismo Realizzato e la Crisi delle Avanguardie”, in A. A. ROSA, Manfredo TAFURI et al, *Socialismo, Città, Architettura URSS 1917-1937: Il Contributo degli Architetti Europei*, Officina Edizioni, Rome, 1976, pp.43-44

historiographical periodisation, and as theoretical qualification of a certain “avant-garde” as “positive”, *at the same time*. It is not so much that the “negative” is also “positive” and the “positive” is also “negative”, as it is that the “historical avant-garde”, “the avant-garde” of the period everyone agrees is the period of “the avant-garde”, is all “positive”, even when it is “negative”.

Gail Day does not reach this point. They are both “positive” because they are so at the level of content, and that is what ultimately defines them. For Tafuri, the “positive” and the “negative” are not just equivalent mechanisms through which “avant-gardes” construct themselves in contradiction. The “negative” is clearly superior, it leads away from ideology into critique, and Tafuri both loves “the avant-garde” for triggering the potential for it, and despises it for failing to grasp it. Naturally, he has sympathy for those sections of “the avant-garde” that expressly aim at negation, even if they are ultimately revealed to be the religious sort of atheist. But where one might identify an “avant-garde” that can pierce the veil of meaning entirely, leaving behind “positive” ideology, and elevating itself to the status of pure “negative” critique, one would find a “fully-negative avant-garde”, an “avant-garde” which would take as its task the explicit enunciation of the very contradictions of its historical time. Tafuri cannot find such an “avant-garde” within the constraints of the “historical avant-garde”, with the possible exception, and only up to a certain level, of the first, “*most rigorous*” phase of Russian formalism, which starts between the realms of literature and linguistics, far from the visual arts and even further from architecture. One should be more precise and define its realm as that of literary criticism, of reading literary work, not of producing it. It is not an artistic school, but a school of critique, so when Tafuri manages to pair it with Dada, Expressionism and sections of Futurism as part of the “negative avant-garde”, his relation to it is undoubtedly more favourable, since “the project” is harder to find (even if he does find it in the end). This forces Tafuri to be more rigorous than usual in his definition of terms and concepts, something he is not very good at which makes reading his work quite difficult. Hence the probable reason why Tafuri’s largely forgotten text on *Really Existing Socialism and the Crisis of the Avant-Garde* can be so helpful in extracting from his muddled writing these consequences, consequences he never makes explicit and indeed might have been himself relatively unaware of.

To find this “fully-negative avant-garde” Tafuri would have to engage in a meta-historicisation of the term. He would have to stretch the category of “the avant-garde” beyond

its “historical” limits. Very much as Bann did to “constructivism”. Unlike Bann though, and indeed unlike most people at the time, he would not just try to pull it into the present. Instead, he would first push it away towards the past.⁶⁵

Tafuri never addresses explicitly the definition of the category of “the avant-garde”, much as he never really defines any other concept or category he uses with precision. With the exception of the one he invents in 1968, “operative criticism”, he never takes much time to explain what words mean in the context of his argument, and how that meaning differs from that which they may have in other arguments. Indeed, one could say that there are no full concepts for him. Even when he is plodding his way towards making concepts, through his particular critical method, they never really rise above less defined notions. That is a structural difficulty in reading his work, a main source of his theoretical ambiguity, and it is especially true for the category of “the avant-garde”. However, it is hard to fault specifically him for imprecision in this term, for even while he talks about it as if it was a commonly understood category, something that exists *a priori* in architectural historiography as a general consensus, it hardly is. “The avant-garde” is commonly seen today as a historical object. It would be easy to present it as one in which interest develops in Europe during the time Tafuri is most active, the period between the mid-1960s and the 1980s. And that is the way it tends to be presented. But that is only half true, for “the avant-garde” is not simply a historically existing object the “new lefts” in culture suddenly decided to take an interest in. It is instead a historiographical construction the “new lefts” in culture are laboriously producing during that period. And while they are producing it, the category is hardly stable or consensual, especially in Italy.

To understand how this is so, let us look at some of the most relevant moments in the construction of “the avant-garde” as the broad meta-category that it has come to be. Specifically, let us focus on two of the most influential efforts in producing a theory of it, during that crucial period we identified before when “the avant-garde” is invented as a historiographical category, between the early 60s and the late 70s.

⁶⁵ That Tafuri cannot include any architecture in his list of the “negative avant-garde”, much less the “fully-negative” one, must also be of course noted, and probably given relevance as to why he goes so far into the past, meta-historicising the category, all the way to Piranesi and beyond.

2 – The Word and the Thing

Theories of “the avant-garde”

It is easy to sympathise with Jochen Schulte-Sasse when he complains, in the foreword he writes for Peter Bürger’s *Vermittlung-Rezeption-Funktion* in 1979 – which would later become the foreword to the influential American publication of Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* in 1984 – of how Renato Poggioli, in his own 1962 *Teoria dell’Arte d’Avanguardia*,⁶⁶ addresses “the avant-garde” as a central mechanism of bourgeois art that can be observed and analysed straight down through the 19th century. Schulte-Sasse explains that:

“If (...) a connection between bourgeois, capitalist society and scepticism towards language can be found in the late eighteenth and in the entire nineteenth century, then it becomes highly questionable whether Poggioli’s setting up of linguistic conventionality against the avant-garde can serve as a starting point for a «theory of the avant-garde». For then the term avant-garde would have to be stretched to apply to the late eighteenth century and would become an empty slogan, no longer able to help us distinguish romanticism, symbolism, aestheticism, the avant-garde, and postmodernism from each other.”

“Poggioli’s criteria are both historically and theoretically too unspecific; his arguments cannot accomplish what must be the primary task of a «theory of the avant-garde»: to characterise with theoretical accuracy the historical uniqueness of the avant-garde of the 1920s (Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism, the left avant-garde in Russia and Germany).”⁶⁷

On the face of it, Shulte-Sasse is demanding historiographical rigour in the use of the category, one that isn’t stretched beyond its history, a stretching that for him distorts the theoretical reading away from that which is specific and therefore, central to it. From this citation alone we might be tempted to put Shulte-Sasse in the position of a traditional scholarly historian whose aim is to define a clear periodisation, and this periodisation seems to be for him solidly established in relation to an objectively existing historical object, which is no surprise given that he is writing in 1979. But Poggioli is writing in 1962, and Shulte-Sasse, in this tirade, misses the whole point. For Poggioli himself starts his entire book with the following paragraph:

⁶⁶ Schulte-Sasse mistakenly places Poggioli’s book in 1968, which is the date of its publication in English.

⁶⁷ Jochen SCHULTE-SASSE, “Foreword: Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde”, in Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, pp.viii, x

*“To begin with, few thinkers, historians, or critics have deigned to study one of the most typical and important phenomena of modern culture: so-called avant-garde art. Critics have not paid much attention to its essence, let alone its manifestations, and valid attempts to interpret the concept implicit in such a term as «avant-garde» are rare in the compendia of aesthetics and the handbooks of art history. Rare indeed are the philosophical dictionaries, cultural encyclopaedias, and outlines of «great ideas» which include this item or attempt to give it a useful definition, even as a mere dictionary entry. As for the innumerable incidental and casual references that ritually accompany the phrase as it constantly recurs in the written or spoken criticism of modern art, it would certainly not be unjust to claim that these are almost always limited to a picturesque use of the image etymologically or metaphorically contained in the term itself. In line with the prevalent tendency of literary journalism, this term, like many others of its kind, is treated with the literal minded verbalism that takes the word for the thing.”*⁶⁸

He develops this problem in a section called *terminological ups-and-downs*, where he explains how the use of the term “the avant-garde” had been up till then almost exclusively restricted to Latin languages, Spanish, French and Italian. But even there, it is nowhere near a universal term for those who study what he considers the phenomenon to be. And indeed, it is in English that the term most suffers, not just from not being used much, but from being associated almost exclusively with French art, and certainly as something alien to Anglo-Saxon culture.

It is important to note that Poggioli is concerned both with where the term “the avant-garde” is used, and where the object it refers to is tackled. One does not necessarily come with the other. Thus he speaks of Ortega y Gasset, for example, as one of the fundamental authors facing “*the problem of the avant-garde in its totality*”⁶⁹, yet one who never used the term. Indeed, for him “the avant-garde” is both a thing that needs looking at and a term that needs consolidation – in other words, it is a concept in definition, that he is not simply using as-is, but actively proposing as-becomes, as a new, crucial category in aesthetic historiography and theory. The object is only the object within the framework of its theoretical understanding, the fact of “the avant-garde” is entirely dependent on the conceptual articulation of it, and it is this articulation that he believes must be done, and does in an inaugural fashion in this book.

⁶⁸ Renato POGGIOLI, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1968, p.1

⁶⁹ Renato POGGIOLI, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1968, p.5

The problem of how this articulation is necessarily a deliberate construction does not escape Schulte-Sasse either, albeit in a less explicit fashion. Shortly after his critique of Poggioli's use of the concept, he produces the specific distinction between "the avant-garde" and "modernism" as two historiographical categories that are often conflated, in his opinion wrongly so. And he describes Poggioli as producing a theory of "modernism" under the guise of a theory of "the avant-garde", therefore perpetuating such confusion:

"Poggioli's «theory» is at best a theory of modernism that explains certain basic characteristics of artistic production since the middle of the nineteenth century (...). His book is vulnerable, owing to his inability to determine the qualitative (and not just the quantitative) difference between romanticism and modernism. Yet, in his tendency to equate modernism and the avant-garde – and to subsume both under the label «modernism» - Poggioli typifies the Anglo-American tradition. It is no coincidence that John Weightman gave his book of 1973 on the subject the title, The Concept of the Avant-Garde. Explorations in Modernism. and Irving Howe uses the two terms interchangeably (...)." ⁷⁰

Schulte-Sasse's argument has, like Poggioli's, two dimensions. He addresses both the historiographical delimitation of the object in the past, and the theoretical conceptualisation of it in the present. The distinction in historiographical delimitation is as we've read: where "modernism" is something that happens roughly within the timeframe Poggioli talks about – mid-nineteenth century onwards – "the avant-garde" is an early twentieth century phenomenon. The distinction in theoretical conceptualisation, on the other hand, is succinctly put by him like this:

"Modernism may be understandable as an attack on traditional writing techniques, but the avant-garde can only be understood as an attack meant to alter the institutionalised commerce with art. The social roles of the modernist and the avant-gardist are, thus, radically different." ⁷¹

It is evident that the weight of Schulte-Sasse's argument leans towards this, theoretical, dimension. Schulte-Sasse does not make the explicit appeal for the strict periodisation of "the avant-garde" as he believes it should be. Instead we get the feeling he (like Tafuri) takes it as a

⁷⁰ Jochen SCHULTE-SASSE, "Foreword: Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde", in Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, pp.xiv-xv

⁷¹ Jochen SCHULTE-SASSE, "Foreword: Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde", in Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, p.xv

consensual, *a priori*, understanding. Yet he sees a confusion between this and the other, also perceived as consensual, category of “modernism” at a theoretical level, and since the periodisation and the theoretical conceptualisation are strictly connected with each other, he explicitly criticises the authors he does as confusing the first because of their failure to grasp the second.

In order to take full advantage of this debate, we must look at the crux of the argument Peter Bürger makes in the book for which Schulte-Sasse’s foreword is written. It has already been quickly presented in the last citation: the avant-garde is an “*attack meant to alter the institutionalised commerce with art*”.⁷² But Bürger does not simply identify this central characteristic of “the avant-garde”, he historicises the possibility of its coming-to-be, and with it, he historicises the development of the historiographical categories he himself uses. And to do so, he feels the need to start with early Marx, his (still proto-) definition of the concept of ideology, in his critique of religion in *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*:

“The young Marx denounces as false consciousness an intellectual construct to which he yet does not deny truth (...):

«Religion is, in fact, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet gained himself or has lost himself again. (...) Man is the world of man, the state, society. This state, this society, produce religion, which is an inverted world-consciousness (...). Thus, the struggle against religion is indirectly the struggle against that world of which religion is the spiritual aroma. The wretchedness of religion is at once an expression of and a protest against real wretchedness. (...)

The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is a demand for their true happiness. The call to abandon illusions about their condition is the call to abandon a condition which requires illusions. Thus, the critique of religion is the critique in embryo of the vale of tears of which religion is the halo.»

(...) In this analysis, religion is unveiled as contradictory: despite its untruth (there is no God), it is truthful as an expression of misery and as a protest against this misery. Its social function is equally contradictory: by permitting the experience of an «illusory happiness», it alleviates the existence in misery; but in accomplishing this, it simultaneously prevents the establishment of «true happiness».

⁷² Jochen SCHULTE-SASSE, “Foreword: Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde”, in Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, p.xv

(...) Criticism is not regarded as a judgement that harshly sets one's own views against the untruth of ideology, but rather as the production of cognitions. Criticism attempts to separate the truth of ideology from its untruth (...). Although the element of truth is present in ideology, criticism is needed to expose it.

(...) For Marx, the critique of religion and the critique of society belong together. Criticism destroys the religious illusions (not the elements of truth in religion) in order to make man capable of action: «The critique of religion disillusion man so that he will think, act, and fashion his reality as a man who has lost his illusions and regained his reason.»⁷³

After expanding on this concept of ideology and the role of criticism in general terms, Bürger points out that he does not mean to state that the critique of art is to be made exactly in the same terms as the critique of religion, since “*literature does not have the same status as religion*”.⁷⁴ But it is inescapable for him that the critique of art, or more precisely the critique of aesthetic discourse, must be made as a critique of ideology just as much as the critique of religion does. Why this section is so important will be addressed later on. For now, it establishes the specific perspective – the critique of ideology – that Bürger believes critique and history of Art must take after “the avant-garde”. We are, of course, reminded of Tafuri. But Bürger is concerned with something different. He is less concerned with addressing the ideologies of “the avant-garde” as such, and more with seeing in “the avant-garde” a tool for the historicisation of aesthetic ideologies in “modernism”.

Bürger follows with another argument he takes from Marx, in the beginning of chapter two. There he addresses Marx's more matured historicisation of knowledge, via his considerations on the historical possibility of his own critique of political economy, in the *Grundrisse*. Specifically, how Marx considers that the historicity of theoretical formulations on reality does not in any way contradict the general validity of such formulations. Marx's proposal is that it is the historical development of the actual material object being theorised that creates the possibility of its theorisation. As the capitalist mode of production matured, so did the field of political economy, and as capitalism destroyed the social and ideological structures of the previous dominant mode of production to create its own structures,⁷⁵ political economy became

⁷³ Peter BÜRGER, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, pp.6-9

⁷⁴ Peter BÜRGER, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, p.9

⁷⁵ The industrialisation of England and the Prussian unification of Germany are two particularly important examples for Marx and Engels

increasingly able to conceptualise the fundamental mechanisms of not only capital but also the development of history of human societies as a whole, via the development of categories such as, precisely, “mode of production”. Bürger uses the example of “labour”:

“«The example of labour,» *Marx writes*, «shows strikingly how even the most abstract categories, despite their validity – precisely because of their abstractedness – for all epochs, are nevertheless, in the specific character of this abstraction, themselves likewise a product of historic relations, and possess their full validity only for and within those relations.»”⁷⁶

Marx here makes an epistemological argument on the historicity of knowledge which refuses any form of relativism. The category has general validity, even if its existence is conditional on a given historical reality. Why is this so important for Bürger that he spends the first sixteen and a half pages of his book on such broad theoretical considerations? The answer comes immediately afterwards:

*“It is my thesis that the connection between the insight into the general validity of a category and the actual historical development of the field to which this category pertains and which Marx demonstrated through the example of labour also applies to objectifications in the arts.”*⁷⁷

From this axiomatic proposition, Bürger will develop his historicisation of “the avant-garde” as the specific mode of artistic praxis that develops at the historical moment “art” itself has become recognisable as a social institution. With the development of the capitalist mode of production comes the historical development of the institution “art” as an autonomous field. This field establishes, on the one hand, its own specific economical sub-system in the form of the art market – as opposed to previous social mechanisms of funding art like church control or oligarchic patronage. On the other hand and as a consequence, it also establishes its own specific disciplinary ideology which has a degree of autonomy from the general ideology of developing bourgeois societies – particularly via the institutionalisation of, and subsequent struggle within and against, the academies from the late seventeenth century onwards. Only because of this historical development does the very category of “art-as-institution” become conceptually possible. The autonomy of the field eventually generates an ideology of separation from social reality in the form of “aestheticism”. And this ideology in turn establishes the

⁷⁶ Peter BÜRGER, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, p.16

⁷⁷ Peter BÜRGER, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, p.17

possibility of a critique of such separation, and therefore of the very status of “art-as-institution”, which obviously requires the maturation of the conceptualisation of such category. This last development is what constitutes “the avant-garde”, and it is through it that a full historicisation of “art” in broad terms can be made.

So “the avant-garde” is the product and agent of the aesthetic/theoretical realisation of “art” as a general category. Bürger here historicises both the historical development of “the avant-garde” as an object and that of “art” as a category. This is the same kind of problem Poggioli was identifying around “the avant-garde” alone – its historical reality and the historical perception of it. This problem should be understood as the distinction between the objective existence of a category and the subjective existence of it. It is Bürger’s proposition that only by trying to theorise “the avant-garde” as an objectively existing entity, can aesthetic theory properly historicise the category of “art” itself, or in other words, realise its subjective existence. Bürger does not however address that initial problem Poggioli was concerned about a decade earlier – he does not apply his historical materialist theoretical model, taken from Marx, to the subjective existence of “the avant-garde” – it is taken “as is”, again and as we have become used to by now, as an *a-priori* established aesthetic category, as if it was a consensual one. This might seem a bit paradoxical – how is it that Bürger, who very successfully theorised the subjective existence of “art” from the objective existence of “the avant-garde”, failed to address that “the avant-garde” has a subjective existence of its own? This, particularly in the context where the category “art” had been very much a consensual one for at least a century before him, and that the category “the avant-garde” was an altogether new phenomenon whose definition was still being discussed, a discussion within which Bürger writes his book. It should have been quite simple for Bürger to perceive that “the avant-garde” needed to be addressed in its subjectivity as well, and that his model – that the historical development of the object creates the subjective conditions for the theorisation of it – could and should have been applied to the very category that is the central object of his book. Why wasn’t it?

This is a particularly relevant question given that “the avant-garde” is not only not a category in generalised use before the late 60s or even early 70s – especially, as Poggioli notes, outside Latin languages – it is also not in use by those who are identified under such term, the writers and artists and architects etc. of the 1910s-1930s. “The avant-garde” is not a category in use by “the avant-garde” – almost never do they refer to themselves as such, it is not a term of self-identification. People in “art” in the period self-identified with the specific group or movement they were a part of. They were – using Schulte-Sasse’s previously cited selection – “*futurists, dadaists, surrealists, and [the «left avant-garde» in Russia and Germany]*” formalists, suprematists, constructivists. And etc. They were not “avant-garde”. Such broad

categorisation, a meta-category that boxes all these categories into a same historiographical package, is an altogether posterior development made by historians, a development Bürger is a part of. There is nothing wrong in such an effort to meta-categorise, and arguments against it from the perspective of an empiricist micro-history would be implicitly anti-theoretical in nature. But it is a gross mistake to confuse, in Poggioli's terms, "*the word for the thing*". The category of "the avant-garde" is so prevalent and consensual today that it is very easy to tacitly conflate its objective and subjective existences. And yet the use of the term is non-existent at the time. This is not to say there is absolutely no perception of it as a general phenomenon, but there is no definite term for it, and the phenomenon is understood in many different and contradictory ways. The nature and relevance of such conflicts will be examined in the context of the Soviet architectural debates, but for now it should be noted that such conflicts, given the correctness of Bürger's identification of "the avant-garde" as a critique of artistic autonomy, tend to exist around the relationship between "art" and its outside, and are mainly philosophical and political.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ The claim that "the avant-garde" is not a term used by "the avant-garde", despite its truth, might easily rouse instant suspicion, given the overwhelmingly generalised usage of the term today and the lack of a serious history of the use of the term itself. Other than a brief mention by David Cottington in his excellent but quite limited in scope *The Avant-garde: A Very Short Introduction*, I have not seen this simple but possibly startling fact addressed. Not even Donald D. Egbert, in his fundamental article *The Idea of "Avant-garde" in Art and Politics* from 1967, explicitly makes this point, even if it is clear from the examples given in his historical synopsis that the term "the avant-garde" was during the inter-wars period monopolised by communist politics, as opposed to the periods before and after.

As such, it is entirely understandable that many would expect that "the avant-garde" would have been in common use by the very people that contemporary art history sees as the quintessentially "avant-garde" artists. And as a consequence, I feel here in some way pressured to give proof of this opposite claim, which is quite difficult, for it would require me to prove a negative. It is obviously not possible to prove the term wasn't used other than by displaying every single text written by the people in question and showing the term is not anywhere to be seen in them. Besides the scale of such task, that is quite simply outside of the scope of this thesis. What I will say here is that not only is the term not used by them, it is also never stated that it is by any serious researcher of the field. In no circumstance do Poggioli or Bürger or indeed any historian of the Soviet avant-garde, architectural or otherwise, state or give any example of the term being used by an "avant-gardist". See:

David COTTINGTON, *The Avant-garde: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013

Donald D. EGBERT, "The Idea of "The Avant-garde" in Art and Politics", in *The American Historical Review*, Vol.73, Nr.2 (Dec.1967), pp.339-366

So Bürger is part of the historical development of the historiographical category “the avant-garde”. His book is concerned with the historical subjectivity of the development of historiographical categories. So, why does he not historicise the category he himself is developing, but only the category “art”? The answer may lie in his own, and Marx’s, theoretical model for the historical theorisation of categories. Bürger states that the historical development of an object is the condition for the possibility of its theorisation, in its general validity. A given object requires a certain historical “critical mass”, as it were, in order to be fully perceivable as such. “Art-as-institution” can be historicised by Bürger, then, because the development of “aestheticism”, and the critique “the avant-garde” made of it, developed the object “art” to the point of that “critical mass”. Bürger’s lack of historicisation of the category of “the avant-garde”, then, might imply that the object “the avant-garde” had not yet reached, in 1979, the point of its “critical mass”.

“The avant-garde” is considered, by Bürger and by Schulte-Sasse, as a historically complete object that ends in the 30s. They refer to later developments as “post-avant-garde”. As far as the periodisation Schulte-Sasse so strongly advocates for would be true, “the avant-garde” would have reached its full historical development already to the point that it is fully in the past. The conditions for its full theorisation should then be gathered. And we could, and probably should, see the development of the historiographical term “the avant-garde” as precisely the identification and theorisation of the object it relates to. But this is not at the same level of historicisation that Bürger brings to “art-as-institution”. The development of the category “the avant-garde” from the 60s to the 80s to refer to the object that existed in the 20s and 30s is akin to the development of the category “art-as-institution” in the second half of the 19th century to refer to the object “art”, in its progressive historical autonomisation as a field, taking place since the founding of the academies in the late 17th century. The historicisation Bürger makes of the category “art-as-institution” is an additional theoretical step that is not simply acknowledging the objective presence of the object, but addressing the subjective perception of it in dependence of such presence, and consequently simultaneously historicising term and fact. The word and the thing, as Poggioli puts it. He needs to and can achieve this level of historicisation in his *Theory of the Avant-garde* because, for him, “the avant-garde” is precisely the moment where

Cottington produces a comprehensive history of the use of the term. It is not made in a linear way in a particular section of the book, instead it is spread out throughout it. The mention that the “avant-gardists” themselves did not use it is in page 49.

“art-as-institution” reaches that level of “critical mass” that allows him to historicise it. Bürger needs to historicise “art” in order to theorise “the avant-garde”, and only in the effort to theorise “the avant-garde” can “art” be fully historicised. It is the proposal of this thesis that he doesn’t need to and cannot yet achieve the same level of historicisation in regards to the category of “the avant-garde” itself because “the avant-garde” is not yet, despite Schulte-Sasse’s demands for historiographical rigour, a fully developed historical object in 1979. There is not yet enough “critical mass” of “the avant-garde” for it to become the target of subjective historicisation at the time. That “critical mass” is beginning to be felt only in the present, and “the avant-garde” did not end in the 30s, it has carried on.

Here we must return to the end of the last chapter. “The avant-garde” has carried on, in this we must agree with Stephen Bann. But it has not carried on in the way Stephen Bann wants to believe it did in which Western “neo-constructivisms” carried the torch of “constructivism” in the post-war period. The way it has carried on lies in how Stephen Bann himself carried the torch of “the project”, in the Tafurian sense, moving it from aesthetic praxis into history writing, in order to save the special “quality” of the cultural agent from the spectre of its historical dissolution. Or in other words, the objective existence of “the avant-garde” that ended after the 30s was replaced by the subjective existence of “the avant-garde” after the 60s. The word continued the thing.

“The avant-garde” and politics

If we accept the conclusions of this chapter and the last, we have to deal with this additional complication. Suddenly, the objective existence and subjective existence of “the avant-garde” become the same thing. One must not confuse the word and the thing, as Poggioli warns us. But we have now raised the possibility that after the war, the word is not simply the subjective awareness of the thing that is possible after the thing has passed – as in Bürger’s formulation – but an actual continuation of the phenomenon that lies in the thing. The problems identified in Bann are an indication that the defeated ideological position of “the avant-garde” may live on in the historiography of “the avant-garde”. The historiography of the object then would have become the object itself, as all the ideological implications of the latter, which Tafuri helped us to broadly identify on the basis of the Soviet “avant-garde” in architecture, would have migrated into the former.

This is not an issue that is present only in Bann, nor only in the historiography of Soviet art and architecture. The persistence of these ideological implications can be discerned in the very same broad inaugural efforts to theorise “the avant-garde” we have just looked at. To see

that, we have but to look a bit further into Schulte-Sasse's foreword to Bürger. Specifically, we see it at the end of it, when he feels the need to criticise Bürger for being excessively defeatist in his prognosis for the future of art after "the avant-garde". The way in which he produces this critique is quite interesting. He starts off by making a general statement on the current status of art criticism that is a natural consequence of Bürger's theory:

"(,,) the deconstruction of art as an institution by the avant-garde made obsolete the discourse of any literary criticism that would try to define itself as a purely literary science while at the same time claiming to be able to adequately describe the function of art in society.

*(...) Peter Bürger's book is extremely valuable in showing why this is the case and why the collapse of the institution of art necessitates a change in literary science, for it can no longer remain autonomous when art is not autonomous."*⁷⁹

This is, in many ways, a repetition of the constructivist critique of formalism. In it we can see how art history and theory is repeating in the 70s the debates art itself had in the 20s. But this is a secondary consideration. Schulte-Sasse then goes on to make the general pro-theory argument that:

*"We should no longer have to stress that the scientific status of literary science is not founded upon our ability to develop in good positivist fashion inventories of facts about literature. These facts are important, but we must reflect on them in historical and theoretical ways. Such reflection, of necessity, should include some thought about the future not only of art but of the institution of literary criticism as well."*⁸⁰

It's in the reflections for the future that Schulte-Sasse finds Bürger lacking. Bürger doesn't really make many of these. He perceives the defeat of "the avant-gardes" of the 30s as a product of historical contradictions that cannot be re-winded. In this his vision is close to the Tafuri of 1971. But the nature of the contradictions is quite different. While Tafuri identifies them mostly at the level of direct social function – the ideology of planning is superseded by the reality of planning – Bürger, who deals with no architecture and thus with no planning, locates them at a more abstract level. For him, the same pulverisation of meanings in association to conventional

⁷⁹ Jochen SCHULTE-SASSE, "Foreword: Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde", in Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, p.xli

⁸⁰ Jochen SCHULTE-SASSE, "Foreword: Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde", in Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, p.xli

forms, and the destruction of the aesthetic value of wholeness, establish a new historical circumstance in which no form and no content can be perceived in any way to be of more or less value, or usefulness, or critical capacity, than any other. More, the critique of the autonomous institution of art that “the avant-garde” revolves around– even while “the avant-garde” tries to explicitly present the intervention in social life as an alternative – is inherently a critique of art’s capacity to continue operating as an agent of human awareness:

“Duchamp’s provocation not only unmasks the art market where the signature means more than the quality of the work; it radically questions the very principle of art in bourgeois society according to which the individual is considered the creator of the work of art.”⁸¹

Bürger could have gone further and stated that Duchamp’s provocation questions the objective existence of the artistic quality of a work. In these provocations, the field of art becomes self-aware of the historical subjectivity of its own existence, for the museum can no longer be seen as the place where art is collected, but the institution that decide what is and isn’t art in the very process of collecting it. Furthermore, after this self-awareness is forced upon art by itself, even the “avant-garde” alternative to “aestheticism” – art as a specific vehicle of social critique – is sabotaged, since there is nothing specifically artistic about any art work after all. That makes this critique unrepeatable too, since:

Once the signed bottle drier has been accepted as an object that deserves a place in a museum, the provocation no longer provokes; it turns into its opposite. If an artist today signs a stove pipe and exhibits it, that artist certainly does not denounce the art market but adapts to it.”⁸²

Again, Bürger could have gone further and stated that if an artist today did such a thing, they would not be making a comment on the institution of art, but instead an attempted comment on stove pipes. Hence how the critique of market relations articulated through the critique of “art-as-institution”, that the “historical avant-garde” constructed, is inevitably displaced, in a “post-avant-garde” context, by an attempt at a direct aesthetic critique of the market and all elements of life as conditioned by it, potentially including stove pipes. This is the persistence of “the project”.

⁸¹ Peter BÜRGER, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, p.52

⁸² Peter BÜRGER, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, p.52

The impossibility of this critique is already contained in the “avant-garde” negation of “art-as-institution”, but this must be disregarded by any who aim at continuing it. And that is why Schulte-Sasse can do nothing but misread Bürger. There is no “project” in Bürger. He sees the consequences of “the avant-garde” as necessarily “negative”. He asserts how the “avant-garde” critique of capitalism was made and could only be made via the critique of the institution of art in capitalism. Once “art-as-institution” has been exposed, the aesthetic critique of society can no longer be, and returning art to life is effectively impossible:

“(…) the resumption of avant-gardiste intentions with the means of avant-gardism can no longer even have the limited effectiveness the historical avant-gardes achieved. To the extent that the means by which the avant-gardistes hoped to bring about the sublation of art have attained the status of works of art, the claim that the praxis of life is to be renewed can no longer be legitimately connected with their employment.”⁸³

This is, for Bürger, the post-avant-garde condition, a condition of absolute aesthetic relativism, in which Art loses any capacity to both be autonomous from social reality in the tradition of “aestheticism”, and be operative in the transformation of that same social reality in the tradition of “the avant-garde” and what Tafuri calls its “project”. “Art-as-institution” and “the project” both become simultaneously impossible. It becomes very hard not to see in this proposal of Bürger the implication that the post-avant-garde condition carries the demise of art itself. And the fact that Bürger’s final statement regarding this comes in the final chapter supported by an argument on Hegel, who famously argued in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* for the future death of art and its replacement by more useful systems of organisation of knowledge, probably only helps to fuel the frustration Schulte-Sasse feels regarding this conclusion to Bürger’s book.

This is why Schulte-Sasse needs to end his foreword with the just cited considerations on the need for the critique of art after “the avant-garde” to be as non-autonomous as art itself has consciously become. He is not just advocating a political critique of art, he is advocating art as a still valid and central form of political critique. He is trying to extend the “avant-garde” condition into the same present where Bürger – and Tafuri – sees only its downfall. For all his use of the term “post-avant-garde”, and for all his demands for historiographical precision against Poggioli, he effectively erases any substantial distinction between “avant-garde” and

⁸³ Peter BÜRGER, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, p.58

“post-avant-garde” conditions. He is trying, in fact, to maintain that the aesthetic critique of “art-as-institution” can still serve as a central form of critique of society. In short, he is trying to save “the project”, by turning the “avant-garde” critique of the autonomy of art into the very mechanism of the autonomy of art. And the way in which he does this is interesting for our purposes.

Schulte-Sasse remarks, but a couple of sentences after the last citation we looked at, that:

*“Bürger’s historical view proves, when closely examined, to be pessimistic as well. He is convinced that the avant-garde’s intention of reintegrating art into life praxis cannot occur in bourgeois society, except in the form of a false sublation or overcoming of autonomous art. The assumption that this reintegration is impossible implies either that history is determined solely by objective laws of development independent of human subjectivity (a view which, since Lenin, has been characteristic of so-called scientific Marxism and the vanguard party mentality associated with it), or a pessimism à la Adorno that is no longer capable of conceiving of intervention and progress, but endures and waits for change in a state of paralysis. At the very least it implies the conviction that even if a social agency of progress were conceivable, it would surely not be art.”*⁸⁴

Several points are striking in this extract. The first is the curious fact that to save “the project”, Schulte-Sasse feels the need to, out of the blue, attack Marxism and the “vanguard-party”. The second is the degree of ignorance he displays regarding Leninist theory, a theory that establishes, against any mechanistic or positivistic interpretation of Marxism, precisely the crucial importance of human subjectivity in relation to the development of the objective conditions in any real process of social transformation. The third is the implied belief that refusing the central role of art in constructing said subjectivity is the same thing as refusing the role of subjectivity altogether. Leading directly from this, the fourth point is the clarity with which the ideology of “the project” is expressed at the end, by straightforwardly refusing any argument that art may not be a, or even the, “social agency of progress”. This entire paragraph must be read as the construction of an aesthetic alternative to socialist politics, effectively part of a liberal rejection of the horizon of socialism in the critique of capitalism.

Schulte-Sasse follows this with a desperate attempt at establishing that from Bürger’s theory we should conclude that art is indeed that agent. Art would do this via the subjective organisation of experience – which is ironic, since we saw already and will see in greater depth

⁸⁴ Jochen SCHULTE-SASSE, “Foreword: Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde”, in Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, p.xlii

how the historical “avant-garde” tended away from this towards a direct “organisation of reality”. The level of desperation can be particularly felt in the way he refers to Benjamin’s considerations on intoxication:

“the «loosening of the self by intoxication is, at the same time the fruitful, living experience that allowed these people to step outside the domain of intoxication.» Benjamin believes that «the religious ecstasies or the ecstasies of drugs» lead to a «profane illumination, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration» for which intoxication itself can only «give an introductory lesson.» The intense experience of intoxication sharpens the senses for those «materialistic inspirations» - a term meaning nothing other than the sudden transformation of sensuous-material experiences into forms of awareness.”⁸⁵

Schulte-Sasse would have Benjamin be the inventor of the Woodstock hippie stoner, and the Woodstock hippie stoner as the vanguard of the revolution. He may be right about Benjamin and we shan’t delve into what Benjamin’s actual argument may or may not be, but if he is right, then Benjamin would be wrong. Why he’d be wrong is explained by none other than Marx, when quoted by Bürger, in the very critique of religion with which both Bürger and our analysis of Bürger started:

“«The wretchedness of religion is at once an expression of and a protest against real wretchedness.»”⁸⁶

That much may be true and in this Marx supports Schulte-Sasse’s use of Benjamin, his “sudden transformation” of “experiences” into “forms of awareness”. But there is nothing *sudden* about how the truths lying in religion can be extracted, in how they may become “forms of awareness”. This construction of awareness can only be operated through the critique of religion, for:

“«The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is a demand for their true happiness. The call to abandon illusions about their condition is the call to abandon a condition which requires illusions.»

(...) Criticism attempts to separate the truth of ideology from its untruth (...). Although the element of truth is present in ideology, criticism is needed to expose it.”⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Jochen SCHULTE-SASSE, “Foreword: Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde”, in Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, p.xlv

⁸⁶ Peter BÜRGER, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, p.6

Schulte-Sasse feels trapped in such a way that he completely abandons the role of critique. What he here argues for is nothing short of the replacement of the critique of religion by simply religion, as if it carried inherently within it the unfolding of the critique of itself. And religion here is more than a metaphor for art. The way in which Schulte-Sasse proposes “avant-garde” art operates as a “*social agency of progress*”, through the organisation of experience, is explicitly the exact same in which this religious intoxication would in Benjamin, while being at the same time the vehicle of the critique of such intoxications. The difference between experience and critique of experience disappears. Again we see, as foreword to the very foundational book theorising “the avant-garde” death of “the project” in its most general terms, how the “negative” potential of “the avant-garde” is already turned into the “positive” ideology of “the project”, and how this ideology effectively dominates, at the cost of the practice of criticism itself. Schulte-Sasse is locked alone in the museum with the urinal, fiercely trying to fool himself into believing that the urinal can at a time be a critique of the institution of art and a critique of the institution of pissing. And to believe as well that “the avant-garde” can and will continue into the future the revolutionary praxis of taking the piss out of capitalism.

In fact, Schulte-Sasse wants “art” to go on forever “taking the piss out of capitalism”, and therefore, has no real interest in capitalism actually being overcome. The effective consequence of this is that the real ideological function of both “art” and “art-criticism” in the liberal West ends up being to “take the piss out of socialism”, as Schulte-Sasse explicitly feels the need to do already in 79, precisely because it threatens to actualise the destruction of the autonomy of art that was under attack by “the avant-garde” he supposedly likes *for that very reason*.

One may speculate that it is precisely to avoid such an idealist reading that Bürger starts off his book with a long consideration on how the critique of art must be performed as a critique of ideology in the Marxist sense. That foundation of the argument is here revealed, via Schulte-Sasse’s interpretation, to be intrinsically linked to its conclusion regarding the impossibility of the continuity of “the avant-garde” and its “project”. Since Schulte-Sasse is invested in validating the “avant-garde” critique of “aestheticism” as a still relevant form of art critique today – as opposed to the critique of “the avant-garde” itself – he must simultaneously be invested in reducing the concept of critique of ideology to the ultimate absurdity that it is already contained within the reproduction of ideology. To this follows several things: that the

⁸⁷ Peter BÜRGER, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, pp.6,8

ideology of art is the central method of the critique of society, and therefore the “*social agency of progress*”; that the only relevant, or at least the central, subjectivity is aesthetic subjectivity; and that Marxism-Leninism, in proposing a different form of subjectivity as central – class-political subjectivity – rejects subjectivity entirely and is therefore deterministic in theory and conservative in practice.

It becomes more and more clear that all these theoretical and historiographical attempts at rescuing “the project” share two constants. The first constant is that the ideology of “the project” in art praxis is imported into and survives in the disciplines of art history and critique in the form of the theory and historiography of “the avant-garde”. The second constant is that it is perceived as having its nemesis in the Leninist “vanguard party” political theory and praxis.

The first constant determines the function of the category of “the avant-garde” in contemporary art historiography and theory, and determines even the special position of architecture in it. We will later see how the consolidation of the category of “the avant-garde”, that occurs late in the 70s and through the 80s in what was earlier called the second of two historiographical phases, is done precisely through the re-articulation of architecture and visual arts via a fusion of its respective two largely separate historiographies.

The second constant determines the specific function of the historiography of the Soviet “avant-garde” in the construction of the broader category of “the avant-garde” as a whole. It has already become noticeable how the presence of the Soviet “avant-garde” in the historiography of twentieth century art simultaneously enables a level of abstract politicisation of the field that can be extended into the present and also, in its death-by-totalitarianism narrative, a neat independence, we might even say innocence, from the gritty complexities of actual revolutionary politics – in other words, it enables the presentation of the “historical avant-garde” strictly within liberal-bourgeois post-war ideology.

The systematic presence and association of these two constants betrays a structural theoretical and political nature to their connection: “the project” is the idealist project of culture versus materialist political economy; and that of “left” bourgeois democracy versus revolutionary politics. To unravel this connection, we will have to work through these two constants in depth. To do so, we will have to examine the history of the Western historiography of the Soviet “avant-garde”, and the way in which it is not only telling of the new, post-war, and especially post-68 understanding of the relationship between culture and politics, but also a fundamental instrument of the ideological construction of this understanding in the emerging field of cultural studies and its particularly insidious companion, cultural politics.

But before we start extensively going through this historiography, we must first address how the migration of “the project” from art practice to art history is structural to the

development of art criticism, particularly in architecture, during the 70s. And the optimal way to do this is through a central agent of this migration, the same Manfredo Tafuri who stood, as we have seen earlier, as the foremost denouncer of the ideology of “the avant-garde” in the discipline. Identifying the handicaps of Tafuri’s theoretical construction is essential both to enable us to use his valuable contributions – which have already been pointed out and will continue to be used when opportune – while overcoming the limitations of his critical mechanisms. Indeed, it’s only through a critique of Tafuri’s category of “operative criticism” that we may fully develop the alternative category this thesis proposes – “the historiographical link”. And it is in this difference that we may clearly establish the very method of this thesis, that of historiographical critique based on a historicisation of categories, as the necessary method for the identification of the ideological role of contemporary art theory and historiography – that of depoliticising the politicisation of art, and indeed, of depoliticising politics itself.

3 – Operative Criticism and “the Historiographical Link”

“The project” and history

We should not hesitate to categorise the period between 1969 and 1973, between *Per una Critica dell’Ideologie Architettonica* and its book version, *Progetto e Utopia*, as the period when Tafuri, in developing his critique of the “historical avant-garde”, is at his best. We have already covered, in broad terms, the consequences of this critique for the historiography of “the avant-garde”, and specifically the role of Soviet architecture in it, through the largely overlooked *Il Socialismo Realizzato e la Crisi delle Avanguardie*, which is published right in the middle of this period, in 1971. Further use of Tafuri’s work of this period will be reserved for the instances where we address specific points of the Soviet architectural debate in the late 20s and 30s.

What we must address now are Tafuri’s efforts to understand the role of historiographical production in relation to the “historical avant-garde”, that he undertakes just before and after the aforementioned five years. The critique of “the avant-garde”, and particularly of its “project”, suffers a notable transformation in *Il Progetto Historico* in 1976 – which would become the introduction to *La Sfera e il Labirinto* in 1980 – a transformation that defines Tafuri as not only another agent of the return of “the project”, but as the structural agent of it for the “post-avant-garde” (maybe even “post-modern”) understanding of history writing in architecture. In order to grasp how Tafuri’s critique of “the project” morphs into a reaffirmation of it, in a changed form, we must first address the frailties of the theoretical foundation on which it grounds itself, a foundation laid in *Teorie e Storia de l’Architettura* in 1968. This, the first of Tafuri’s broadly theoretical publications, is the point where he lays down three foundational axes of all his future work. The first is the establishment, like Poggioli, of the “avant-garde” condition as one that stretches into the past throughout modernity. The second is the establishment, like Bürger, of his critique of architectural history as a critique of ideology. The third is the establishment of such critique, very much unlike Bürger, on a fundamental misconception of what ideology and its critique are.

We must look at each of these three axes in turn.

Tafuri’s central goal in *Teorie e Storia* is to attack what he perceives as a general bankruptcy of the discipline of architectural history, by revealing its practice as being ideologically compromised with the architectural “avant-gardes” of its time. Being published in 68, this book identifies this compromise mainly in the formal historicisms of what would come to be called “post-modernism” in architecture. While such historicisms are validated by

architectural historians at the time as if they meant a renewed respect for history's teachings, Tafuri perceives them to be the very opposite of what a committed practice of history writing must be. In dismantling the historical validation of historicism in his present, Tafuri presents it as a product of a structural ideological conditioning of the discipline of architectural history in modernity – all modernity – to the extent that it is shown to lack any real autonomy, serving mainly as an ideological crutch of practice. This practice is revealed as inherently ambiguous in its relation to history, and this ambiguity as a fundamental mechanism of any and all “avant-gardes”. The argument that will sustain this critique starts out by sort of mapping out a history of historicism, beginning in the Italian renaissance. The particular debate on historicism he identifies in the Florence of the quattrocento is viewed as “*the true origin of the process*”⁸⁸, this process being simultaneously that of an architectural praxis that is “avant-garde” and a praxis of architectural history that is ideological.

There is no need to go into detail on the myriad examples Tafuri uses to make his point. For every single example, he identifies two ideological poles in tension that espouse two distinct ways of relating to history. He starts off with the distinction between an “*anti-historical*” Brunelleschi and a “*compromise*” with “*the ghost of the Middle Ages*”⁸⁹ espoused by Alberti, and goes on through the history of modern architecture up to the “historical avant-gardes” of the early 20th century:

“A. On the one side there are those who tend to perpetuate the figure of the artist-magician: those who, apparently, get close to the new world of industrial production but then withdraw immediately because of the use they make of it. Italian Futurism, particularly in its least «European» manifestations, in part Dada, the more dogmatic sections of the Russian Constructivism are all «breakaway» movements, because they no longer hide the new productive, social and moral reality created by the universe of precision behind aesthetic pretext. But, faced by this new nature of artificial «things», used as basic material for their artistic work, they still behave with a mentality anchored to the principle of mimesis.

Industrial things take the place of Classical Nature, of the Illuminist cult of man, and even of Reason: they are the result of the pitiless logic of capital that has destroyed, paradoxically, the faith in anthropocentrism. (...)

B. On the opposite side are Gropius, Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe. They identify the new laws of the equipment, and solve, by entering into it, its irrationalities and contradictions. They do

⁸⁸ Manfredo TAFURI, *Theories and History of Architecture*, Harper and Row, New York, 1980, p.14

⁸⁹ Manfredo TAFURI, *Theories and History of Architecture*, Harper and Row, New York, 1980, pp.16-17

not accept the industrial new nature as an external factor and claim to enter into it as producers and not as interpreters (...).”⁹⁰

Here we have the distinction between those who replace the pre-modernist representation of “nature” with the continued representation of a (contradictory) machine made new natural, and on the other hand, those who see themselves as agents of production aimed at overcoming its contradictions. In this excerpt it becomes immediately apparent that the two modes of relating to history are inexorably connected to the two “avant-garde” approaches to intervention in the material world – the “negative” and the “positive”. It is telling that it is the “negative” that is the closest to historicism, the eclectic fragment serving, in Tafuri’s view, as an agent of the dissolution of meaning. That fragment, however, no longer comes from the aesthetic conventions of the past, but from a naturalised world of technological objects. The point is not that historicism is present in the “historical avant-garde” and its rupture with historical references, but that its division into a “positive” and a “negative” trends is essentially identical to, and serves the same purpose as, the division of previous “avant-gardes” into a trend that is anti-historical and one that is of compromise with historical references. That purpose is always anti-historical at a deeper level, and that anti-historical understanding each “avant-garde” makes of its own present – or in other words, its ideological reading of its own cultural function in its own historical context – is directly connected to what Tafuri will later diagnose as the inevitably “positive” ideology of its “project”.

Tafuri then is concerned with demonstrating that historicism too is anti-historical, and in doing so, he posits that an anti-historical ideology permeates the entirety of the development of modern architecture. That ideology, articulated by the dialectic between the “positive” and

⁹⁰ Manfredo TAFURI, *Theories and History of Architecture*, Harper and Row, New York, 1980, p.32

Tafuri also identifies a side C, but that is but a middle ground in the scale between the two radical poles and as such needs no mention for our purposes.

It must also be noted that it is likely that Tafuri at this time knows very little about the history of Soviet architecture in its early years, less than the already limited knowledge he shows in 71. As such, the term “constructivism” is here used with the usual confusion between a broad category for Soviet art of the post-revolutionary decade and a half, and the specific constructivist trend in the visual arts of the early 20s. This includes some architects, but those that would later found ASNOVA, the group against which “constructivism” in architecture would be established. There is no place for the architectural “constructivism” of OSA in this use of the term – indeed if Tafuri would have addressed OSA in this text, he would have likely put its members together with Gropius, Le Corbusier and Mies in pole B.

“negative” trends – that always ends up favouring the “positive”, as Tafuri would add after 69 – is what “the avant-garde” truly is for Tafuri – not just a particular period in art at the start of the twentieth century, but a structural mechanism of modern art that lies at the foundation of its historical development as a social, and ideological, institution.

“In this way, the neat cut with preceding traditions becomes, paradoxically, the symbol of an authentic historical continuity.”⁹¹

“With this we have not only confirmed the coincidence of the death of history and the crisis of the object, but we have also found the thin link that joins the most anti-constructive to the most constructive movements in contemporary art: Dada and De Stijl. They fully coincide in their negation of any validity of the object and in their prophecy of the coming of collective action, that will result in the new city.”⁹²

So both the “negative” and the “positive” “avant-gardes”, even as they refuse the meaning of form, are shown to work towards what the later Tafuri will call “the project”. As we have established earlier, the “historical avant-garde” is “negative” in form, “positive” in content. But also, and this here becomes crucial, the “avant-gardes”, both in their historicism and their anti-historicity, ideologically organise themselves against history, or rather, against any form of consciousness of their own historically conjunctural existence. The historiographical narratives that will rise in support of the “avant-gardes” are always, inherently, deformations of real history. These deformations are the focus of Tafuri’s attention, to the extent that they are identified in the title as “theories” versus “history” – a formulation that should more adequately be that of “ideologies” versus “history”, since “ideologies” is clearly what Tafuri means by “theories” here. The same conflict appears in the practice of historiographical construction, named “operative criticism” as opposed to, simply, “criticism”.

Tafuri doesn’t move as far back as the Italian renaissance to find his first example of “operative criticism”. He finds it only in the late seventeenth century in Bellori’s complete dismissal of the Roman baroque and preference for Poussin’s classicism.⁹³ He traces it through

⁹¹ Manfredo TAFURI, *Theories and History of Architecture*, Harper and Row, New York, 1980, p.30

⁹² Manfredo TAFURI, *Theories and History of Architecture*, Harper and Row, New York, 1980, p.36

⁹³ The timing of this is interesting, for it puts “operative criticism” showing up at the time that the “art-as-institution” of Bürger can be said to be formally established, with the foundation of the several royal academies of liberal arts in France during the second half of that century, the first adaptation in a European state-in-formation of Italian academic models.

enlightenment theory up to the first historiographies of modernism of Zevi or Giedion, which are:

“(...) at the same time both, historiographical contributions and true architectural projects.”⁹⁴

This is possibly the first of Tafuri’s explicit uses of the category of “the project”. It is telling that it happens when associated with the identification of two foremost examples of “operative criticism” of the period immediately following the demise of the “historical avant-garde”.⁹⁵ Indeed, it is from this critique of “operative criticism” that “the project” will be extracted by Tafuri as a central category to then be applied to the critique of “the historical avant-garde” that he will produce over the following half decade.

It is apparent that the present thesis follows the route of Tafuri’s analysis quite closely. Like him, it is proposing that deformations in the dominant historiography of “the avant-garde” – the Soviet one in this specific instance, which has special relevance to the emergence of the category of “the avant-garde” as a whole, as has been said before and will be addressed later – can be traced back to an ideological voluntarist position in the discipline of architecture – which Tafuri categorises as “the project”, a category this thesis follows – that defines the discourses surrounding architectural practice between the 20s and 30s. Differences, however, start as soon as Tafuri begins defining the historical moment when “operative criticism” happens, and ultimately what its function is and what is the alternative to it. These differences are why this thesis could not begin by simply talking about “operative criticism” in the Western historiography of soviet architecture, and instead advances the alternative category of “the historiographical link”.

“The project” of “operative criticism”

Tafuri begins his definition of “operative criticism” in terms that this thesis can readily use:

“(...) operative criticism plans past history by projecting it towards the future. (...) its theoretical horizon is the pragmatist and instrumentalist tradition.

⁹⁴ Manfredo TAFURI, *Theories and History of Architecture*, Harper and Row, New York, 1980, p.151

⁹⁵ A demise Tafuri places in the 30s, as we have seen earlier. Tafuri in this passage mentions specifically Giedion’s *Space, Time and Architecture* and Zevi’s *Storia dell’Architettura Moderna*, respectively from 1941 and 1950.

(...) *its attitude is contesting towards past history, and prophetic towards the future.*"⁹⁶

This thesis has been up till now less concerned with how “the historiographical link” stretches the past towards a “projected” future and more with how it “projects” a present. This difference, however, can easily be ascribed to the presents in question being different for this thesis and for Tafuri. If Tafuri is writing at the time when “the project” in historiography is constructing a new role for the cultural intellectual that safeguards their position of, as Schulte-Sasse puts it, a central “social agent of progress”, we are now living an exhaustion of this notion that causes the same position, in the mainstream artistic “avant-gardes” of our time, to become imbued with a measure of naked cynicism that prevents any generalised acceptance of it – Zaha Hadid, who legitimises herself with the Soviet “avant-garde”, can hardly be seen as an heir to its political commitments except in the most vague ways, and even Patrick Schumacher has ceased to claim that hers was the architecture of the city of communism in the mid-90s. Two notes must here be made, however. First, the difference between present and future tends here towards irrelevance, for even the present of globalised liberal capitalism has been systematically presented at least for the past two decades as an end of history and therefore, as an eternal future. Second, the vague ways in which Hadid can eventually be perceived as an heir to Malevich also in his politics are actually much more important than a simple dismissal on the grounds of cynicism would realise, for what Hadid and Schumacher propose is that architectural advancement by itself leads us to a better future, that the “social agency of progress” is no longer politics, but architecture, even as it serves globalised liberal capitalism – their position therefore being remarkably close to that of Schulte-Sasse – and so the “project” of parametricism is just as directed towards the future as that of the “historical avant-garde” of the 20s and 30s – “*architecture or revolution*”, a formulation that, despite its obvious social-democratic content, is not really that far off from Malevich’s position, who presented his “suprematism” as a cultural alternative to Bolshevik politics.⁹⁷ The future in Tafuri’s formulation must then necessarily be read in terms of the category of “the project” that he has not yet, in 1968, fully formalised, and this “project” has as its purpose always to present a

⁹⁶ Manfredo TAFURI, *Theories and History of Architecture*, Harper and Row, New York, 1980, p.141

⁹⁷ See Pamela KACHURIN, *Making Modernism Soviet: The Russian Avant-Garde in the Early Soviet Era, 1918-1928*, Northwestern University Press, Chicago, 2013

current practice as the one that carries the seeds of the historical future, by reading such seeds back into the past.

Tafuri places the rise of “operative criticism” in two types of situations:

“(...) when an uneasy stasis renders necessary a new courage, stimulated by criticism; and when an artistic revolution is establishing itself and needs the clarifying and divulging support of a deeply involved and committed historiography.”⁹⁸

This is an interesting proposition. It places “operative criticism” before the advent of the artistic revolution – the main one being addressed is that of the “historical avant-garde” – and after it started. In the before the start, Camillo Boito, Viollet-le-Duc, James Fergusson, who:

“(...) are the historians that precipitate the impatient request for a new architecture.”⁹⁹

In the after the start, Behne, Pevsner, who:

“(...) are the allies of the fundamental revolutions in modern art”¹⁰⁰

But Tafuri immediately introduces a third category, Sarte, Vittorini, Zevi, who are members:

“(...) of an ideological wave trying to fill the gap between civil commitment and cultural action.”¹⁰¹

In the chronology of the “historical avant-garde”, these last come after its end, at least according to the later Tafuri, who we have seen proposing that the death of “the avant-garde” is an architectural death that takes place in the 1930s, when its “ideology of planning” is superseded by real planning. The historiographical operation Tafuri here executes is curious. He first states: “there are two types of situations, A and B.” And then follows: “A has the following examples. B has the following examples. And C has the following examples”. And before any response to this accusation of imprecision comes up stating that Tafuri obviously does not really make that difference between what is here identified as B and C, that he does and simultaneously doesn’t is precisely the point. He feels there is enough of a difference to require

⁹⁸ Manfredo TAFURI, *Theories and History of Architecture*, Harper and Row, New York, 1980, p.148

⁹⁹ Manfredo TAFURI, *Theories and History of Architecture*, Harper and Row, New York, 1980, p.149

¹⁰⁰ Manfredo TAFURI, *Theories and History of Architecture*, Harper and Row, New York, 1980, p.149

¹⁰¹ Manfredo TAFURI, *Theories and History of Architecture*, Harper and Row, New York, 1980, p.149

a separation between the two line-ups of examples, and in the definition of their function – and the way in which he describes the function of C shows he is very close to the crux of the problem. But he does not ascribe this difference to a changed historical situation, since both are supposed to exist in historical situation B:

“(…) when an artistic revolution is establishing itself and needs the clarifying and divulging support of a deeply involved and committed historiography.”¹⁰²

This is not a mistake, but a linguistic *faux-pas* that must be read as symptomatic. Tafuri feels a difference but cannot pinpoint its historical cause, for he cannot here yet perceive that the demise of the “historical avant-garde” in the 30s, that he will diagnose a couple of years later, fundamentally changed the rules of the ideological game architectural historiography is playing. In this passage, the “historical avant-garde” is still establishing itself. But it is this third category that is the most relevant for the ideological status of the period Tafuri is writing in and which structural conceptual framework persists till today. It is, as has been repeatedly stated, the moment in which art and architectural historiography come up with the category of “the avant-garde” simultaneously as a precise art-historical periodisation and as a broad aesthetic meta-category. And it is the moment when “the project” migrates to art history from art practice, for it is faced with the impossibility of the continued existence of “art-as-institution” after its most voluntarist architectural expressions have been rendered moot by the economical and political advent of the really existing plan.

Tafuri is unable to systematise this distinction in his 1968 periodisation of “operative criticisms” around the “historical avant-garde”, because even while he can describe the “post-avant-garde” ideological condition quite accurately – as that of desperately trying to fill the gap between politics (“*civil commitment*”) and culture after the explicitly politicised-culture/culturalised-politics of “the avant-garde” has met its end – he cannot fully understand it and its mechanisms – including its mechanisms of historiographical periodisation that are condensed in the category of “the avant-garde” itself – because he is a part of that very ideological wave. By this we do not mean that he does not have enough historical distance to be able to fully unfold his analysis. No, he is an active participant in this ideological wave, not just a close observer of it. The unrelenting attack he will develop during the following half decade against the ideology of “the project” – the critique of the “historical avant-garde” in architecture

¹⁰² Manfredo TAFURI, *Theories and History of Architecture*, Harper and Row, New York, 1980, p.148

that he will develop from 69 to 73 – an ideology that underlies both architectural practice and the deformations of history its ideologues impose on historiography, despite being very useful and needing to be taken very seriously, will ultimately come to serve, not a materialist re-affirmation of the central role of political economy and class politics against the idealist primacy of the intellectual cultural agent, but the substitution of the artist-as-producer-of-ideologies with the historian-as-producer-of-truths as the truly progressive intellectual cultural agent.

To support this claim, we must explain why it is that “operative criticism” is not an operative category for a critique of ideology, why Tafuri’s notion of ideology is excessively simplified and mechanical, and why to Tafuri’s historicisation of the “historical avant-garde” we must necessarily add the historicisation of the history of “the avant-garde”. For Tafuri, “operative criticism” must be eliminated, for it is pure ideology, invented by historians, to support the claim, as we have seen, of art and specifically architecture to be the harbingers of the future – “the project”. In Tafuri’s view, it doesn’t matter if that future is a post-capitalist future, as the Soviet “avant-gardes” propose and as Schulte-Sasse would like it to be, or the more explicitly post-political future of, for example, Le Corbusier in which architecture voids the need for revolution *tout-court*.¹⁰³ The point is that the institutions of culture, art, architecture, give themselves a central role in achieving it, and that is idealist bourgeois ideology, for it ascribes an excessive amount of historical power to superstructural institutions. Tafuri oscillates between categorising it as an ideology of capitalism and the ideology of architecture as a discipline.¹⁰⁴ He identifies also explicitly this ideology of architecture as a discipline with the preservation of a notion of a special “quality” of intellectual labour. To put it

¹⁰³ Le Corbusier becomes a central example for Tafuri in *Progetto e Utopia*. But also Hilberseimer, and the BAUHAUS in general, etc., in short, the “positive” “avant-gardes” in Western Europe, are characterised as bearers of social-democrat politics which are disguised by an idealised technical primacy of the architectural solution. And just as the “ideology of the plan” of the Soviet “avant-gardes” falls with the advent of real Soviet planning, so do these Western “avant-gardes” fall with the development of post-29 Keynesian policies.

¹⁰⁴ Tafuri is justly criticised for this ambiguity in defining who it is all this ideology belongs to, by Tomas Llorens, in an article in A.D. in 1981, just after the publication of *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*. Llorens raises the point that, in a Marxist framework, a critique of ideology must identify the material origins of it, and therefore, give it a class character. Tafuri is never particularly explicit in doing so, but sufficient clues are given by him to allow us to add to him the necessary amount of precision. See:

Tomas LLORENS, “Mandredo Tafuri: Neo-Avant-Garde and History”, in *Architectural Design*, Vol.51 Nr.6-7 (1981), pp.83-95

in unambiguous Marxist terms – terms Tafuri never really manages to get to but hints at – one should categorise it as the ideology of a specific sub-sect of the petty-bourgeoisie, the intellectual petty-bourgeoisie, for what it safeguards is their specific role in the capitalist general distribution of labour. To dismantle this ideology, critique is required, and that must take as its task the replacement of “operative criticism” with its enemy – an objective search for true History:

“Operative criticism is, then, an ideological criticism (we always use the term ideological in its Marxian sense): it substitutes ready-made judgements of value (prepared for immediate use) for analytical rigour.”¹⁰⁵

“(…) does the projection (on history and on the present) of the historian’s personal ideology really help the knowledge of things and the action on them, once this ideology has taken the place of the objective survey of the situation?”¹⁰⁶

Ideology in its “Marxian” sense is quite obviously, for Tafuri, simply false consciousness. A false consciousness determined by the dominance of the capitalist mode of production in general, and the specific role in the relations of production of the architects-intellectuals in particular. True History must rise above the ideological pretences of influencing the course of history, free itself from the Benjaminian “aura” with which even “the avant-garde” ended up veiling itself – for it is always “positive” even when it is “negative”. In short, the historian must become an objective, supra-ideological agent, whose job is to expose historical reality as-it-is to those who operate under the myth of their own supra-historicity:

“(…) the historian accentuates the contradictions of history and offers them crudely, in their reality, to those whose responsibility is to create new formal worlds.”¹⁰⁷

The contradiction becomes here immediately apparent. Tafuri is, regardless of what he himself might believe, structurally unable to historicise himself. He is structurally unable to historicise himself even to the extent Bürger did. Bürger, who treated “the avant-garde” as a strict periodisation, did not historicise it as a historiographical category, which is entirely understandable since he was part of the process of constructing it. But he did historicise himself in relation to the object of the “historical avant-garde”, explaining why it was only at his time,

¹⁰⁵ Manfredo TAFURI, *Theories and History of Architecture*, Harper and Row, New York, 1980, p.153

¹⁰⁶ Manfredo TAFURI, *Theories and History of Architecture*, Harper and Row, New York, 1980, p.150

¹⁰⁷ Manfredo TAFURI, *Theories and History of Architecture*, Harper and Row, New York, 1980, p.229

after its demise, that such object could be theorised, and why this theorisation involved the historicisation of the category of “art-as-institution”. For Tafuri, “the avant-garde” is mainly the broad meta-category that he sees as a mechanism of all modern art since the Italian Renaissance, and while he produces the most interesting explanation of its fall in the 30s, he is never quite able to treat the decades that separate him from then as a fundamentally different historical moment. That is why the ideologues of “the avant-garde” between the 20s/30s and the historians of the avant-garde after the 40s both belong to situation B, even if he perceives the difference between the function of their work. He diagnoses the historical inevitability of the death of “the avant-garde” in the 30s, yet he still sees his present as dominated by the ideology of “the avant-garde” and its dead “project”, within the field of history. He is, for the same reason as Bürger, unable at his time to perceive the historicity of the category of “the avant-garde”, a category whose function becomes to keep “the project” alive after the “historical avant-garde” has passed, by transporting it into art history. And so, the only available answer he has to the ideological deformations of that history is to situate it in an “avant-garde” tradition so old as to be synonymous with the history of liberal “art” itself, the history of its ideology being the history of the development of capitalism, and the task of the critic being that of objectively exposing the truth of such ideological conditioning. That the critic/historian himself is subjected to his own material circumstances does not occur to Tafuri, for the very same reasons he is unable to define in clear terms which class it is exactly that the ideology he is attacking belongs to. He doesn’t say it belongs to the intellectual petty-bourgeoisie, even if his analysis points towards it, because acknowledging this would immediately place the historian within the same ideological realm as that of the architect. Instead, through his identification of “the project” he ascribes to artistic and architectural practice an inherent ideological character that is excessively defined as being intrinsic to the discipline/profession, instead of defined by the class character of its professionals. One should consider his quite valuable diagnosis of “the project” as the diagnosis of the specific mechanism through which the ideology of the intellectual petty-bourgeoisie manifests itself in cultural production, and not as the over-arching root of all ideological deformations. Because just like Tafuri explains that there is no special “quality” to intellectual labour, and the attempt to safeguard such “quality” is the ideological imperative of “the project”, there is also no special “quality” to architectural ideology relative to that of any

other intellectual profession, and to work under that assumption is inevitably to try to protect some other cultural agent – in Tafuri's case, a supra-historical historian, of all intellectual professionals who had the obligation to know better.¹⁰⁸

And it needn't be this way, had he a fuller understanding of the concept of ideology that Bürger started off showing us, at the very start of his *Theory*. For Bürger began precisely by pointing out how Marx:

"(...) denounces as false consciousness an intellectual construct to which he yet does not deny truth.

(...) Criticism is not regarded as a judgement that harshly sets one's own views against the untruth of ideology, but rather as the production of cognitions. Criticism attempts to separate the truth of ideology from its untruth (...). Although the element of truth is present in ideology, criticism is needed to expose it.

Indeed, Tafuri's position in regards to architectural ideology tends very much towards the "judgement that harshly sets one's own views against the untruth", even if he partly succeeds in the "production of cognitions" in his critique of "the avant-garde". It is understandable that he does so at his time, because his historical need is, as was mentioned the very first time we looked at his work in this thesis, to achieve a measure of autonomy of the discipline of architectural history relative to that of architectural practice. His problem is that of excising from history the ideological need to legitimise practice, and at that he succeeds. And in reaffirming the particular importance of an autonomous discipline of history, the Marxist foundation is, of course, very useful, to the extent that it establishes in clear terms how the inherently historical quest to unveil the relationships between social superstructures and the material base is the only possible way of truly understanding any ideological practice like that of architecture. And indeed his critique of "operative criticism" rightly ends up, in the 1968 book, extending a connection between past deformed historiographies and contemporary attempts to theorise architecture in a-historical ways – particularly, theories based on typology.¹⁰⁹ These, together with the false historiographical narratives, are what the "theories" in the title of *Teorie e Storia* stand for, to the extent that in effect, as we pointed out earlier,

¹⁰⁸ Of course, Tafuri talks about ideology *in* the historian, but in him that is not the ideology *of* the historian, but the ideology of the architect corrupting the historian.

¹⁰⁹ Tafuri does so in *Teorie e Storia dell'Architettura* at the end of the chapter on "operative criticism".

when Tafuri says “theories”, what he effectively means is ideologies, categories one would expect a Marxist critique of ideology to consider opposite to each other. Because all theory of architecture must necessarily historicise it, “History”, with capital H, stands in place of “Theory”, with capital T, as the criterion of truth, imbued with the measure of positivism inherent to the defence of history-as-facts.

The pitfall Tafuri falls into here is common to those who work with a Marxist foundation, but not a solid enough one. He takes ideology to be the deformation of historical truth, instead of the general worldview that conditions such deformation. He is correct in his notion that historical truth is not ideological, and indeed implies a critique of ideology, but he is incorrect in confusing that with an inherent a-ideological-ness of an autonomous historical profession, for if knowledge is a-ideological, the production of it is social and therefore, ideologically constrained just like any other production. The source of all ideological deformations in architectural history is not the pervading influence of an inherently ideological architectural practice, it’s the particular class character of the historian – which is quite similar to the class character of the architect, hence why “the project” comes to be rescued by the former when the latter fails to actualise it.

And indeed, a firmer grasp on the Marxist concept of ideology would help Tafuri realise that it is not only not the same thing as the opposite of cognition, it’s not even incompatible with it. Since all production of knowledge is social, and therefore ideologically constrained, either all knowledge is ideological and there is no truth, or certain ideological outlooks are compatible with the production of certain truths, the truths which knowledge is historically possible at any given time for they do not contradict the existing ideological limits. While we should not forget the first position just yet – Tafuri will bring us to it in a moment – the materialist position is, of course, the second. This is the other side of the Marxist historicisation of knowledge that Bürger did not feel the need to address – that the discovery of the universal validity of a category is dependent, not only on the historical unfolding of the phenomenon, but also on the existence of an ideological ground that does not impede the growth of its conceptualisation. Marx himself felt compelled to systematically explain why it is that he managed to overcome bourgeois political economy, and he explains it through the class contradictions existing within the capitalist mode of production, contradictions that are fought out at an ideological level:

“With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed. In considering such transformations a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or

philosophic — in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.”¹¹⁰

He repeats the same case in his prefaces to *Das Kapital*, and Engels even dedicates an entire volume, *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*, to explaining the genealogy of Marxism, and how its science of history only came to be possible with the gradual development and autonomisation of a proletarian ideology that is not only compatible with it, but needs it, just like the development and autonomisation of bourgeois ideology was compatible with and needed the political economy of Adam Smith. When Engels explains that:

“(…) idealism was driven from its last refuge, the philosophy of history; now a materialistic treatment of history was propounded, and a method found of explaining man's «knowing» by his «being», instead of, as heretofore, his «being» by his «knowing».”¹¹¹

He is not saying just that history is always a critique of ideology, he is saying also that the practice of history is itself ideologically constrained and that only within the context of the rise of a proletarian ideology is the “*materialistic treatment of history*”, up till then “*last refuge*” of idealism, possible. The “being” of the working class produces an ideological outlook that liberates, for the first time, history from its idealist, ideologically bourgeois, limits. And indeed, the working class needs that “*materialistic treatment of history*” in order to become fully conscious of its class interests and be able to act in accordance. Or, as Bürger reminded us earlier about the critique of ideology in religion:

(...) For Marx, the critique of religion and the critique of society belong together. Criticism destroys the religious illusions (not the elements of truth in religion) in order to make man capable of action”¹¹²

That is why Tafuri’s articulation of the presence of ideology in historiography through the category of “operative criticism” is simply not operative for the “*materialistic treatment of*

¹¹⁰ Karl MARX, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, n.d. From the Marxists Internet Archive:

<<http://marxists.catbull.com/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>> consulted in 15 July 2016

¹¹¹ Friedrich ENGELS, “Socialism, Utopian and Scientific”, in *Marx/Engels Selected Works*, Volume III, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1969, pp. 95-151. From the Marxists Internet Archive:

<<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/soc-utop/ch02.htm>> consulted in 15 Jul. 2016

¹¹² Peter BÜRGER, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, pp.6-9

[architectural] *history*” he aims to achieve. After identifying intellectual petty-bourgeois ideological deformations in historiography connected to “the project” of architectural practice, he declares as a materialistic, revolutionary alternative the total divorce of history from practice, to the most radical extent that history must turn itself fully towards the past and leave the future to architects. He effectively takes from historical knowledge the fundamental function of all knowledge – the capacity to predict.

*“In that case historical activity, totally indifferent to positive action, becomes «criticism of architectural ideologies» and, as such, «political» activity – even if indirectly political. It must then be recognised, by those that intend to force the institutional role given to intellectuals from illuminism onwards, that to find out what architecture is, as a discipline historically conditioned and institutionally functional to, first, the «progress» of the pre-capitalist bourgeoisie and, later, to the new perspectives of capitalist «Zivilisation», is the only purpose with any historical sense.”*¹¹³

What Tafuri proposes is not the “organic intellectual” who is always painfully aware of the ideological conditioning of his own class and who, recognising the historical demise of what used to be his liberal profession and his impending or already actual passage to the status of an intellectual proletarian, consciously aligns himself with the class interests of the proletariat as a whole, taking advantage of the historically conjunctural liberating elements of its ideology in relation to that of the bourgeoisie. No, what Tafuri proposes as the alternative to the “operative criticism” of the historian who is in thrall of “the project” of the practitioner is the return to the ivory tower of academic history, an ivory tower that replaces cultural practice as the true beacon of progress even as it refuses to look forward. When Tafuri says that history is the only discipline that can “*force the institutional role given to intellectuals from illuminism onwards*”, he is making this painfully explicit, to such an extent that it becomes difficult to say if he is mocking his enemies or just being honest about himself. But the point is that this distinction ceases to matter. In this excerpt, the fundamental difference between himself and his enemies “*melts into air*”, for he is prescribing his own positivistic interpretation of what materialist history is for them all, as the true refuge, today, of the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia. No wonder then that, 12 years later in 1980, “the project” now belongs to history:

¹¹³ Manfredo TAFURI, *Theories and History of Architecture*, Harper and Row, New York, 1980, p.236

“With the fading away of the dream of knowledge as a means to power, the constant struggle between the analysis and its objects – their irreducible tension – remains. Precisely this tension is «productive»: the historical «project» is always the «project of a crisis». Franco Rella writes: «Interpretive knowledge has a conventional character and is a production, a positing of a meaning-in-relation and not an uncovering of the meaning.»”¹¹⁴

Not only a history that has explicitly given up on its capacity to predict and therefore help guide action, as that most unbearably post-modern clause the first sentence opens up with makes clear, but one that has fully moved from a positivistic outlook to the most abject relativism, as Franco Rella clarifies in Tafuri’s stead. Against “the author/artist as producer” of Walter Benjamin and Maria Gough, Tafuri gives us the historian as producer. But not a producer in the sense that knowledge is a social production despite its general validity that Bürger gave us through Marx. No, he becomes a full fledged inventor of interpreted meanings – the very same meanings the “negative” “avant-garde” meant to destroy, with 1971 Tafuri’s applause. In twelve years, from an inherently a-ideological “true history-as-facts” to a history that, having no truth, can be nothing but pure ideology. This is Tafuri’s “historiographical link” – “the project” of “the avant-garde” is explicitly brought back from the past into the present of architectural history.

With it, Tafuri closes the circle of “the avant-garde” – it is fully within the sphere of “the project” that its historiography will construct its ideological labyrinth, even when it is critiquing it.

¹¹⁴ Manfredo TAFURI, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts and London, 1990, p.3

4 – “The Historiographical Link” and Conceptual History

Objects and categories

Tafuri’s historical position makes him simultaneously an ally and an enemy. What he is hashing out is not a struggle for the revolutionary position against the paternalistic, voluntaristic intellectual petty-bourgeois ideology of the cultural agent, but an intra-classist corporatist feud between two different, professionally defined, types of cultural agents within the post-68 reorganisation of the liberal “lefts”. The paternalistic, voluntaristic “project” then is not the problem he is overcoming, but the condition within which he is working. But the specific ideology of the historian that he constructs – that posits that discipline as the truly inherently supra-ideological one, where all vestiges of ideology are impositions from architectural practice that must and can be gotten rid of – enables and, indeed, requires him to produce the critique of “the avant-garde” in architecture through which he diagnoses “the project” in the first place, posing it as an explicit category. That he later imports that category into his own enlightenment positivistic idea of a supra-historical history, which therefore ends up flirting with a post-modern relativism, does not take away from the fact that he also needs to flirt with Marxist materialism in order to achieve his goals.¹¹⁵ And that makes Tafuri, precisely in the measure that

¹¹⁵ That this flirting with materialism is taken by most of the academic lefts as a solid application of historical materialism in architectural history just contributes to and is part of the general co-opting of Marxism by the emerging liberal “project”. Hobsbawm mentions, in *How to Change the World*, how “the USSR and the German Democratic Republic, at the height of the era of Stalin” “may safely be regarded as the least favourable conditions for any original development of Marx studies and Marxist thinking”. See:

Eric HOBBSBAWM, *How to Change the World*, Little, Brown, London, 2011, p.122

I would counter-argue that even if that were true, the West is no better, for it is there that neo-Marxism functions as a broad cultural background in academia within which all ideological positions must articulate themselves, even when such positions are incompatible with materialism, much like atheism had to articulate itself always within Christianity, as pantheism and nominalism, in pre-enlightenment Europe. In the post-60s West however the dominant role is inverted, and it’s the Marxist position that has trouble surviving within the neo-Marxism of the post-modern liberal intelligentsia. This situation has much in common with that where Lenin found himself in during the last decade and a half of the Second International.

It doesn’t escape me though that it is this ideological situation that makes this thesis both possible, for it is accepted in the contemporary academic context, and necessary, for Marxism requires today to affirm its independence against the bourgeois left like never before.

he is a foremost ideologue of the discipline of architectural history of his era – which is still our era – also a most challenging critic and theorist of the ideology of the “historical avant-garde”.

In addition, Tafuri’s inability to comprehend the difference between visions of history that are positivistic, relativistic, or materialistic, has the advantage of enabling him to make a series of theoretical points that are useful for what must be the method of overcoming the historiographical problems he tries to tackle. Indeed, just before the excerpt we finished the previous chapter with, Tafuri makes some general considerations on the dialectic of historiographical production that function perfectly well for our purposes:

“History is viewed as a «production», in all senses of the term: the production of meanings, beginning with the «signifying traces» of events; an analytical construction that is never definite and always provisional; an instrument of deconstruction of ascertainable realities. As such, history is both determined and determining: it is determined by its own traditions, by the objects that it analyses, by the methods that it adopts; it determines its own transformations and those of the reality that it deconstructs. The language of history therefore implies and assumes the languages and the techniques that produce the real: it «contaminates» those languages and those techniques and, in turn, is «contaminated» by them.”¹¹⁶

The only thing one has to add to this excerpt is the level of precision Tafuri tends to lack. He states history is determined by three things – its traditions, its objects, its methods – and determines (transforms) two things – itself, and reality (or, again, its objects). Apart from noting how this notion is incompatible with that post-modern platitude of “*the fading away of the dream of knowledge as a means to power*” that Tafuri will immediately follow with – for then history would determine nothing – we should here point out that his repetition of history’s internal structures – traditions and methods – as two of the three things that determine it, is, in over-emphasising those structures, a relativist “tell”. The dialectic-materialist position is actually much simpler, and closer to Tafuri’s identification of the two things that history determines. History, like all knowledge, is determined and determines always two things: its internal structures, and the structures of the external reality it cognitively organises. But to this we must make an important epistemological addendum – that this external reality is not made of “objects”. Historical reality or, indeed, reality *tout-court*, objectively has no “objects”.

¹¹⁶ Manfredo TAFURI, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts and London, 1990, pp.2-3

“Objects” are parts in subjective representations of the objectively existing structures of reality, and can only exist within the structures of those representations. This is the problem Tafuri is trying to solve that leads him, because of his positivistic foundation that affirms, in 1968, the primacy of the historical object, into a relativist solution in 1980, and an ever deeper fetishisation of the microhistorical “object” after that. Tafuri is absolutely right when he identifies “*the constant struggle between the analysis and its objects*” that he finds so productive, he just fundamentally misunderstands it at a theoretical level. This doesn’t prevent him from making many achievements within that struggle, only from historicising his own position and, therefore, to fully grasp the historiographical, subjective, existence of the historical “object” of “the avant-garde” and, naturally, to perceive that he himself is tied to the continuation of its ideology.

Tafuri gets closer to this theorisation in the second note to the introduction on “*The Historical Project*” we’ve been reading from, when quoting Emilio Garroni:

“It seems of particular interest that Garroni, starting from Kant, arrives at conclusions similar to our own (...). Garroni writes: «The problem is precisely here: in this particularity and the infinity of modes in which particularity presents itself. Things do not offer themselves up as already clear and simple to those who set out to know them... the world becomes intelligible and synthesised only after a cognitive and analytical operation has taken place... from this point of view, things are, in fact, «inexhaustible» (...), in the sense that they can be determined and organised, to cognitive ends, only if we assume a proper «point of view», an «organising principle», adequate with respect to a certain scientific consideration». ”¹¹⁷

In other words, the historical “object” exists only together with the historiographical “category”. And the category exists only as part of a broader, relational, conceptual framework, which approximates the structure of historical reality. It is at the level of the structure of the conceptual framework that the critique of ideology in historiography (and everything else) is inevitably made. The struggle is not “*between the analysis and its objects*”, but between the analysis and reality, and the structures of both. The objects/categories are themselves the product of the struggle and the field of battle in which it takes place. Or, as Reinhart Koselleck states in his *The Practice of Conceptual History*:

¹¹⁷ Manfredo TAFURI, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts and London, 1990, p.305

*"The problematic of historical anthropology demonstrates how difficult it is to introduce metahistorical categories into concrete research. [...] Again and again, one is faced with the aporia that enduring formal criteria are themselves historically conditioned and remain applicable only to phenomena that can be delimited historically. In other words, in the course of research, all metahistorical categories will change into historical statements."*¹¹⁸

We are immediately reminded of Marx in Bürger:

*"(...) «even the most abstract categories, despite their validity – precisely because of their abstractedness – for all epochs, are nevertheless, in the specific character of this abstraction, themselves likewise a product of historic relations, and possess their full validity only for and within those relations.»"*¹¹⁹

Koselleck is a particularly helpful ally in this context. The way he frames the same problem Tafuri struggles with is free of the kind of theoretical imprecisions inherent to the ideologue of architectural history. He states:

*"My proposition would be that events can never be fully explained by assumed structures, just as structures cannot only be explained by events. There is an epistemological aporia involving the two levels so that one can never entirely deduce one thing from another."*¹²⁰

So the metahistorical categories that make historical thought operational are themselves historically conditioned, constructed objects that serve the purpose of making the understanding of history operative, and always necessarily guilty of reductionism and generalization. For Koselleck, there is no positivistic way out. He has no architectural practice on which to dump all ideological deformations, and therefore history itself must bear the burden of continuously working out the internal tensions of its own work within the confines of its own historical conditions of cognitive possibility. What he develops as a response is a specific mode of historiographical critique, which he names "conceptual history" – a practice which job is to map

¹¹⁸ Reinhart KOSELLECK, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2002, p3

¹¹⁹ Karl MARX, *Grundrisse*, in Peter BÜRGER, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, p.16

¹²⁰ Reinhart KOSELLECK, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2002, p125

out the history of the very objects/categories that the practice of historical research produces and then tends to internalise in an a-theoretical manner.

This cannot be achieved only through knowledge of the existing historiography and its relation to the historical “facts”, even though such knowledge is obviously necessary. What is most relevant is sometimes that which is missing from histories, or the very way in which that which is said is written – a kind of analysis this thesis has been using extensively. A fundamental problem identified by Koselleck regarding the practice of conceptual history is that the theoretical and ideological preconditions of historical work, and thus its conceptual structures expressed through categories, manifest themselves in language, and the very mechanics of linguistic articulation serve as a direct clue as to how a relationship between historiographies and historical realities – both the realities studied and the ones that are the context of the study – is established. This relationship is most often implicit and rarely explicit. As Koselleck comments about Hayden White’s *“Tropics of Discourse”*:

“No matter what kinds of texts are in question, behind them, White argues, there are always prior tropological decisions. These concern regularities of linguistic articulation that at once open up as well as restrict patterns of interpretation in all imaginable historical situations, time and again, consciously or not, in a more or less encoded way. Hayden White turns the attention of his readers here, to where, according to him, key decisions occur. For example, he poses the question: Into what parts do historians split their subject matter, and which parts do they relate, and in what way, to each other? Or, he asks: How do parts relate to the whole, which parts are singled out as representative, or what is separated out, and in what way, in order to be able to be compared? Or he asks: How are temporal continuities and discontinuities established? All these preliminary questions arising in theory are tested by White in terms of the linguistic decisions out of which they arose. Knowingly or not, linguistic options always thus stand behind theoretical decisions.”¹²¹

While it would be entirely possible to make a relativistic reading of this, it is not necessary. What Koselleck is here making explicit is the very method of reading historiographical narratives so as to extract from them the implicit structures that they take for granted. What is here being proposed is that the explication of these structures is a precondition for a proper historicisation of historical knowledge, both in relation to the historical development of the phenomena – as Bürger explained through Marx – and in relation

¹²¹ Reinhart KOSELLECK, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2002, p40

to the ideological possibilities of the present of historiographical production – as we have added with the help of Marx and Engels.

“The avant-garde” then becomes the central object/category to be scrutinised directly, in both its objective and subjective existence. It has become clear by now that this object/category is intrinsically tied to that valuable conceptualisation of Tafuri – “the project” – and that its subjective existence is not simply a case of “the historiographical link” in architectural, and even cultural, historiography, but the very fundamental mechanism of it. And here, finally, we can precisely define the concept of “the historiographical link”, in great measure as opposed to “operative criticism”. Where “operative criticism” is the ideological deformation of the truth of the historical object imposed by artistic practice on cultural historiography, “the historiographical link” is the a-theoretical weaving of the past into the present imposed by the ideological conditions of the cultural agent who needs to present himself as a post-political alternative to the working class. This weaving is a-theoretical precisely in the measure that it takes its own internal structures as directly derived from the structures of historical phenomena – in other words, in the measure that it refuses to take into account the “epistemological aporia” between the two, and therefore, the produced nature of the objects/categories. The kind of linguistic operations that articulate these relationships, which Koselleck identifies through White, are precisely the objects that must be examined if one is to make a critique of ideology in architectural historiography operational. They are the symptoms of a deep internal structure.

We have as of now brought to the forefront a series of issues of conceptual articulation surrounding “the avant-garde”, specifically in the measure that the categorical decisions of the various historiographies of it, despite their diversity and contradictions between different authors, inevitably end up constructing “the project” in a post-war historiographical practice, regardless if such “project” is a respectful heir or a confrontational alternative to “the project” of practice of the “historical avant-garde”.

What this thesis proposes has much in common with what Bürger does on the category of “art-as-institution”. Bürger deals with the conflict between Adorno and Lukacs on “the avant-garde”, where the first sees it as progressive and the second as conservative. But he spends that time not to take a position between the two, but to propose to overcome the conflict by defining the category of “the avant-garde” as the historical moment when the object/category of “art-as-institution” becomes at the same time fully perceptible in its subjective existence and fully exhausted in its objective one. From that definition, the positions of both Adorno and Lukacs can be seen as a debate that is articulated still within the very limits of “art-as-institution” that “the avant-garde” is rendering obsolete. “The avant-garde” produces a critique of capitalism through, and only through, a critique of the institution of art itself as one historically specific to

capitalism. Beyond this specific critique, made within the bounds of the discipline, “avant-garde” art has no prerogative to produce a particularly operative critique of capitalism as a mode-of-production. After the urinal destroyed the museum in the process of its own self-identification as the institution that is defined by/defines art, the dialectic art/museum can no longer operate as a functional institution of social critique. The question if the formal developments of “the avant-garde” are liberating or restrictive for a critique of capitalism therefore becomes moot.

In the same way, the debates surrounding the historiographical definition of “the avant-garde” as a mode of articulating art and politics can be overcome by the identification of the subjective existence of “the avant-garde” as itself historically conditional to the post-war development of cultural studies. For Poggioli, “the avant-garde” is art critiquing the institutions of the art of its time. For Bürger, it is art critiquing “art-as-institution” as a bourgeois one. For Schulte-Sasse, it is art critiquing capitalism. For Tafuri, it is art simultaneously critiquing and protecting “art-as-institution” and the primacy of the cultural agent. The point cannot be to find out which one is more or less right, but to place the debate as a historical one which function is to move “the project” away from practice and into history – or in other words, from cultural practice to cultural studies. That the ideological struggles of the Western, post-modern, petty-bourgeois “lefts” against Marxism become, in this context, of central relevance, has become apparent. And it follows that the historiography of Soviet and, in broader terms, socialist architecture is inevitably of a special importance in this process, for it is in the Soviet Union, precisely in the time that is the paradigmatic time of “the avant-garde” in the established historiography, that the crucial debate on what are the modes of articulation between culture and politics takes place – a debate that defines the historical development of the “historical avant-gardes” and within which the historiographical definition of them takes place, precisely in such a way as to isolate the contemporary understanding from the Leninist conclusions of that debate.

These ideological deep structures must be extracted from the established historiography of Soviet architecture, as mainly a Western construct of the post-60s, and that effort is what drives the following Part III of this thesis, which functions as sort of a historiographical mirror of this more meta-historiographical Part II.

Up till now we moved from the most contemporary appearances of Soviet architecture to the fundamental characteristics and tensions internal to the very category of “the avant-garde”, tensions that have philosophical and epistemological consequences in relation to the practice of historical work in the ideological context of Western academia in the post-war period. From here on we will move from the very same contemporary appearances of Soviet architecture to produce a more detailed history of the historiography of it as central to the historiographical

construction of “the avant-garde”, in an effort to make explicit the political functions of this category as intrinsic to the replacement of revolutionary politics with the liberal “project”.

As such, we will now go back to the beginning of this thesis, when the first manifestations of this problem can be found already within the Soviet political debate in the mid-50s, a time when a general re-conceptualisation of both political and cultural categories is a central mechanism of the ideological reorganisation of socialism during the Khrushchov period.

Part Three
The Historiographical Construction of
“the Avant-garde”

1 – When Categories Melt: Debating the Thaw

Defrosting “modernism”

This thesis began by looking at a historical novel about architecture in Socialism. In it the notion of a historically lost “avant-garde” architectural “father” would return from the past to redeem its morally lost offspring, offspring that are simultaneously architectural and political. In this case, Socialism itself would be returned to purer, more humane origins. But we noticed how this tale is structurally similar to other, more recent tales that also rescue a lost “avant-garde” as the redeemer of a more post-political architectural present, which feels itself morally lost precisely by the measure of its self-conscious post-politicity. We have seen how this return is performed through a historiographical operation we called “the historiographical link”, an operation that ideologically weaves the past into the present such as to avoid the historical conclusions of the debate on art and politics that saw the death of “the avant-garde” as a historical object. We saw how art history countered this development by giving birth to “the avant-garde” as a historiographical object. And we have moved towards the past, through the historical development of the category of “the avant-garde” itself which became central to art history and theory in the post-war West – its theorisation intrinsically linked to the ideological construction of the very post-politicity on which the liberal cultural “project” depends.

In short, “the avant-garde” comes to redeem an architectural present from a sin that “the avant-garde” helps to construct and perpetuate. It serves both Hadid and Bann – it implicitly politicises that which is a-political and depoliticises politics. Indeed, it does one through the other, and back again. This dialectic – which one could read as a historiographical version of Tafuri’s own “dialectic of the avant-garde”, where “positive” and “negative” turn into each other – is at the centre of “the historiographical link”. It becomes the structural mechanism of the core historiography of “the avant-garde” as it is developed in the West from the 60s onwards. To grasp how this historiography serves its ideological “project” we must now sift through its history following the method we arrived at in the end of Part II – we must produce an exercise in “conceptual history”, that exposes its implicit structures, thereby revealing its ideological functions. And to do so, we will return to the same place where we started.

When we looked at Stefan Heym’s *The Architects*, at the very beginning of this thesis, we mainly framed it within the structures of architectural thought contemporary to the moment of its publication, in 2012 London. We will now frame it within the structures of architectural and political thought at the moment it portrays, the 1956 Socialist block.

The Architects was written between 1963 and 1965, exactly a decade after the Khrushchovite building reforms. This is in addition coeval with the first western account of early Soviet architecture, of the period that would become established as that of “the avant-garde” – Vittorio de Feo’s *URSS: architettura 1917-1936*, published in 1963. It also predates by two years the first of the series of books Anatole Kopp would publish on Soviet architecture – his *Ville et Révolution* from 1967, focusing, again, on “the 20s” – which collectively constitute what is arguably the most influential body of work on the topic, having defined the conceptual framework with which we still approach the history of architecture in the Soviet Union and the eastern block.

The conceptual framework Heym presents us with is well informed. We are faced with a great struggle between two sides. These two sides have both a political and an architectural identification. At the political level, we are presented with “Khrushchovism” against “Stalinism”. These “isms” are not addressed directly. Stalin is almost never mentioned by name, even though he is ever present, a being powerful enough to smooth over all of the bottled up tensions that permeate “really existing socialism”. His death brought with it the sudden release of these tensions that the novel narrates through the history of the main character Julia’s growth as a character.

*"The world's in change, our own world; the only force that held it in its groove... He. But we carried Him to the mausoleum."*¹²²

Khrushchov, on the other hand, appears through his famous “secret speech” – commonly titled *On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences*, presented at the 20th Congress of the CPSU on the 25th of February of 1956. This is the seminal moment of Khrushchov’s reorganization of the ideological system and the economic policies of the USSR, it is probably the least secret “secret speech” in the history of secret speeches – it is arguable that the speech was secret just so it could “leak out”¹²³ – and it is at the origin of the now well established

¹²² Stefan HEYM, *The Architects*, Daunt Books, London, 2012, p.29

¹²³ This exact argument pops up already in 1956 in the West by communist voices opposed to Khrushchovite revisionism, notably in the American journal *Turning Point* between its March and October issues of this year, part of a war against the contents of the speech itself as a set of falsifications. *See*:

“Proletarian Revolution and Renegade Khrushchov (In Defense of Stalin)”, in *Turning Point* Vol.9, Nos.4/5, Apr.-May.1956, and “Khrushchov's Un-Secret Speech”, in *Turning Point* Vol.9, No.6 (Aug.1956). From the Marxists Internet Archive:

concept of “Stalinism”. The denunciation of Stalin as an object in which are condensed the past and present problems of socialism became an ideological tool for what is usually understood as a period of liberalisation, one that saw the release of many camp prisoners and that unleashed the character of Daniel Wollin and “modernism” on the GDR. At an economical level it redirected investment from production to consumer products, a significant part of which was directed towards the housing campaign.¹²⁴ Heym places the novel in the year of 1956 precisely so the speech may pop up exactly when necessary for his political argument to become entangled with his architectural argument.

The architectural conflict in this novel is slightly more complex, for it does not fit the framework contemporary western architectural culture is used to. It is simple to recognize the two sides using contemporary western architectural terminology – Wollin would be seen as representing “modernism”, having remained steadfastly loyal to his BAUHAUS education, and Sundstrom as representing the monumental architecture of “Stalinism”, which categorized itself as “socialist-realism”. But this is not the terminology used in the book. Indeed, the novel does not present us with a clear single conceptual framework for architecture. Instead, each of the two sides seems to have its own, and the battle between them is also a battle between two frameworks, defined through the critique of their enemy’s architecture.

Wollin, the modernist architect, is careful to avoid a direct criticism of the architecture he finds when he rejoins his former colleague in the GDR. Even when Julia asks him for his opinion of the World Peace Road as she shows him around, he resists. When she insists, we are

<<https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/periodicals/turning-point/19560401.htm>> consulted in 2 Dec. 2014

<<https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/periodicals/turning-point/19560601.htm>> consulted in 2 Dec. 2014

¹²⁴ Between 1954 and 1955 several orders would be issued by the Central Committee of the CPSU and the Council of Ministers of the USSR regarding expanding and modernizing the Soviet construction industry, and a plan for the specific period of 55 to 57 would triple cement production *per capita*, and enforce standardized designs in all large-scale residential and civil construction from mid-1956, as well as an increase in standardized projects from 14.5% to 55% of industrial buildings by 1957. This according to R. W. Davies’ contemporary coverage of the debates. Housing production nearly doubled between the periods 1951-1955 and 1956-1960, going from 240.5 to 474.1 million square meters of overall space, according to statistical material collected by Steven E. Harris. See:

R. W. DAVIES, “The Building Reforms and Architecture”, in *Soviet Studies* Vol.7 No.4 (Apr.1956) pp.419, 424.

Steven E. HARRIS, *Communism on Tomorrow Street - Mass Housing and Everyday Life after Stalin*, Woodrow Wilson Center Press/John Hopkins University Press, Washington D.C. and Baltimore, 2013, p.90.

then presented with the only moment in which Wollin openly speaks about “socialist-realist” architecture, in the segment previously mentioned:

“«It isn't only the eclecticism of the thing.» he spoke without turning to her, «the scavenging of detail from a period that, in turn, lived off previous periods architecturally. Nor are the structural mistakes and backward methods decisive; they can be corrected. It's the basic conception that I find difficult to take...»

[...] «An old fashioned corridor street,» he said, «but pretentious. Designed for triumphal processions that lead from nowhere to nowhere in the middle of nothing.»”¹²⁵

Here is the only “ism” he will ever use, eclecticism, in his description of a triumphal avenue that we know from past occasions – addressed in the first chapter of this thesis – is expensively built in a neo-classical style and identical to a design by Speer. This fits with our contemporary concept of totalitarian architecture, even if Wollin refrains from using such peremptory general categorizations.

Sundstrom, the “socialist-realist” architect, has by contrast a powerful category to describe his enemy – “formalism”. Sundstrom repeatedly argues against “formalism” when schooling his respect for the art of the classicals, his submission to the conventions established by the examples of the past, as opposed to an architecture whose only purpose is to announce its author’s whim to be noticed as different.

“Gropius and the whole Bauhaus school were formalism pure and simple.”

“The conception of the New I have in mind does not grow out of some architect's whim, or a striving to be noticed, or a need to sell ideas. It rises organically out of the great experiences of mankind - what Goethe, in his Faust, called the harmonies of the spheres. This concept derives from the works of geniuses like Michelangelo, from our German Baroque masters, and from Schinkel, who caught the pure lines of the ancient Greeks and transferred them into proportions we can grasp. But it also comes from the motives of our folk art in which the plain people express themselves and from which we all can learn...”¹²⁶

This use of “formalism”, however, is in the light of contemporary western architectural terminology a bit weird. Indeed, it would seem to fit Wollin’s critique of the World Peace Road. In today’s conceptual framework eclecticism is formalistic, excessive decorative detail is

¹²⁵ Stefan HEYM, *The Architects*, Daunt Books, London, 2012, p.104

¹²⁶ Stefan HEYM, *The Architects*, Daunt Books, London, 2012, pp.48, 66

formalistic, and especially an emphasis on a triumphal visual effect regardless of the actual use of the road is formalistic. Yet Heym's conceptual framework is well informed because this use of the term "formalism" to categorize what we would usually categorize as "modernism" is one of the hallmarks of architectural, and indeed aesthetic, discourse in the Soviet Union from the early 30s to the early 50s. Heym does, however, miss an important point. In 1956, the date in which the novel takes place, and the date of Khrushchov's "secret speech", "formalism" in the eastern bloc already meant something altogether different.

The reform of categories in the Khrushchovite thaw

The Khrushchovite reform of the party and state policies for architecture, and the arts in general, does not begin with the 20th Congress as much as it ends with it, through the establishment of a direct association of existing disciplinary critiques with a new political critique. Even though the arts are not mentioned until the very end of the speech, it is here, in a brief passage, that a connection between the policies for the arts under Stalin and the cult of personality associated with "totalitarianism" is first implied, when Khrushchov establishes in the first of three tasks of his reform the need:

*"to examine critically from the Marxist-Leninist viewpoint and to correct the widely spread erroneous views connected with the cult of the individual in the spheres of history, philosophy, economy and of other sciences, as well as in literature and the fine arts."*¹²⁷

This is a significant moment in the historiographical construction of the category of "totalitarian art", but it is far from being the beginning of a Khrushchovite reform in architecture that would replace a previous, "socialist-realist" conceptual framework with a new framework, one that is moving towards the framework established in our own contemporary architectural culture.

The moment in which the building reforms enter the realm of architecture at an institutional level can be located in the Builders Conference of 1954. Between the 31st of November and the 7th of December of 1954, the Conference took place in Moscow, as part of a series of conferences on specific sectors of the Soviet economy. By this time, a new ideological

¹²⁷ Nikita KHRUSHCHOV, Speech to the 20th Congress of the C.P.S.U., From the Marxists Internet Archive: <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/Khrushchov/1956/02/24.htm>> consulted in 26 Dec. 2014

environment was already under construction, based on a critique of Stalin's rule, in which Khrushchov was starting to solidify his position as the foremost member of the Secretariat of the Party's Central Committee. A broad debate on artistic orientations had already been taking place since 1953, with literature, as always in the Soviet cultural *milieus*, taking the main role. This debate had a significant public expression in artistic journals, where several Soviet authors argued for a liberalisation of policies and against an excessive schematism in the general line. This position was led by authors who would become notable figures of Khrushchovite cultural policies. Ilya Ehrenburg published his *The Thaw*, the book that originated the popular name for the period of Khrushchovite reforms, in the Spring Issue of 1954 of the official literary journal *Novyi Mir*. In October and December respectively, *Novyi Mir* published articles by Ehrenburg and Pomerantsev that would spark a debate that would spread to other journals and newspapers. The second Congress of Soviet Writers took place between the 15th and the 26th of December of 1954. This debate would extend into music, the fine arts, and architecture. Both the first Congress of Painters and Sculptors and the second Congress of Composers would take place in March 1957.

Because architecture is more important than painting but less important than literature, the Congress of the Union of Architects took place in November 1955. The period between it and the Builders conference of December 1954 witnessed the reversal of the use of the term “formalism”, from the one Sundstrom is confidently using two years too late in 1956 – one should not blame Heym for this mistake, he is compelled by the needs of literature to compress two years of ideological shift into two months – to the one we can relate to Wollin's judgement of “socialist-realism”.

Far from the generally apologetic argument with which Khrushchov would in 56 safeguard the innocence of the party and people of the Soviet Union by blaming all of socialism's problems on the person of Stalin, in the Builder's conference of 54 the responsibility of what was perceived as past mistakes was put squarely on the professional shoulders of the architects. Khrushchov, as the new upstanding member of the secretariat of the CC, personally attended and intervened twice, with a final speech at the end of the Conference, and by harshly interrupting the speech of Arkadii Mordvinov, at the time the President of the Academy of Architecture – the main Soviet scientific institution of architecture since 1934 – because he did not give enough weight to the issue of cost. Mordvinov, even though himself an important participant in the development and consolidation of what was called “socialist-realist” architecture, presented in his speech a critique of what was now considered an eclectic revivalism:

“A tendency has been widespread in the practice of recent years which inclines towards architecture of past periods, and often applies old architectural forms in our circumstances”¹²⁸

Khrushchov's attack on Mordvinov takes advantage of the mostly aesthetic character of his discourse, following the usual line of the new *de facto* head of the Soviet Union to present his views as down-to-earth, eminently practical arguments:

“One wants to ask them [the architects] which people, which working man, said to them: don't put a larder in the flat, deprive me of cupboards, make corridors which you can't carry a piano along and where there is nowhere to put a bicycle or a pram - deprive me of the lot, but decorate up the outside.”

“The main thing is the cost per square metre. It is a measuring-rod. And for you this measuring-rod doesn't exist. Can't you turn to questions of building-costs? I prefer cost per square metre to cost per cubic metre as a measure, because every housewife uses the number of square metres to decide how suitable the flat she gets is.”¹²⁹

We now know that with the development of Khrushchovite pre-fabricated mass housing, all of the people and working men would get access to housing, and would indeed lose the outside décor, but they most certainly would not get the corridor along which they could carry a piano, nor the space to put it in the living room, and it is arguable that it is precisely because of the main thing being the cost per square meter that this would turn out to be so.¹³⁰

Naturally, an inevitable political consequence of the ideological shift in course would be the following year's demotion of Mordvinov, who would henceforth be heading one of Moscow's architectural offices, briefly replaced by his former VOPRA comrade Alexander Vlasov in the presidency of the Academy. This would be immediately followed, one year later in 56, by the dissolution of the Academy of Architecture and its replacement by a new Academy

¹²⁸ From Arkadii Mordvinov's speech at the Builder's Conference as published in *Stroitel'naia Gazeta*, 3 Dec.1954, in R. W. DAVIES, "The Builder's Conference", in *Soviet Studies* Vol.6 Nr.4 (Apr.1955), p.452

¹²⁹ From Nikita Khrushchov's speech at the Builder's Conference as published in *Stroitel'naia Gazeta*, 28 Dec.1954, in R. W. DAVIES, "The Builder's Conference", in *Soviet Studies* Vol.6 Nr.4 (Apr.1955), pp.453, 451

¹³⁰ Steven E. Harris produces an interesting, if suspiciously technocratic, argument for the inevitability of the insufficiencies of Khrushchovite mass housing as a direct result of the measuring system of the apartment's habitable areas. See:

Steven E. HARRIS, *Communism on Tomorrow Street: Mass Housing and Everyday Life after Stalin*, Woodrow Wilson Center Press/John Hopkins University Press, Washington D.C. and Baltimore, 2013

of Building and Architecture, now linked to the State Committee of Construction instead of the Academy of Sciences, and headed by the engineer Nikolai Behtin, who since 43 had been Deputy Minister of Construction. Clearly the line was moving architecture from an autonomous artistic discipline to the servant of a modernized construction industry. In the Congress of the Union of Architects in 55, the bulk of the discussion was already on how to materialize a new architecture defined by standardized construction methods rather than on aesthetic principles. The categorisation of the architecture of what is called “socialist-realism” as “formalism” was completed during that year, particularly through the Order of the Central Committee and the Council of Ministers, dated the 4th of November 1955, *On getting rid of unnecessary extras in project-making and building*.

It is quite evident that the critique of “monumentalism” in architecture taking place at the 1954 Builders Conference follows the same lines that Heym personifies in Daniel Wollin. An almost exact replica of Wollin’s argument can be found between the previous citation of Mordvinov and the following from the speech of Georgii Gradov, the head of department of the Institute of the Architecture of Public and Industrial Buildings of the Academy of Architecture:

“Even in 1944-5, when the country was faced with the urgent job of restoring towns and villages destroyed by the war (...). To beautify the towns architects were called upon to construct monuments and buildings of a size not justified by practical needs. Causing a striking effect was put first.”¹³¹

Indeed, the entire discourse that had sustained the attack on “modernism” as “formalism” during the 30s and 40s was turned on its head in 54, so much so that Khrushchov goes as far as replicating Sundstrom’s argument against novelty but this time using it to accuse the architects of “socialist-realism”:

“Many young architects who have just left their schools and aren't standing properly on their own feet ... rush to make memorials to themselves”¹³²

From this point on, the category of “formalism” would now be applied to the architecture of the Stalin period, merging the previously established “striving-to-be-noticed” that Heym so

¹³¹ From Georgii Gradov’s speech at the Builder’s Conference as published in *Stroitel’naia Gazeta*, 28 Dec.1954, in R. W. DAVIES, “The Builder’s Conference”, in *Soviet Studies* Vol.6 Nr.4 (Apr.1955), p.452

¹³² From Nikita Khrushchov’s speech at the Builder’s Conference as published in *Stroitel’naia Gazeta*, 28 Dec.1954, in R. W. DAVIES, “The Builder’s Conference”, in *Soviet Studies* Vol.6 Nr.4 (Apr.1955), p.452

adequately puts in Sundstrom's words, with the attack on the conventional formal characteristics of this style, now perceived as backward. "Formalism" would from this moment on become the category we recognize today as part of our conceptual framework. From this turn of events it becomes clear that the category of "formalism" too is anything but stable, and instead a historically defined historiographical construct. It would be possible to look at the entire history of the development of Soviet architecture as not simply the history of the development of the category of "formalism", but in fact as the history of a conflict between two starkly different and opposing categories of "formalism" – "formalism" as opposed to "functionalism", as the Soviet "avant-garde" understood it and as tends to be perceived today, the "formalism" that disdains social function; and "formalism" as opposed to "realism", as it emerged as the Soviet debate evolved in the 20s and 30s, the "formalism" of those who, in their attempt to act socially, privilege static visions of the future and ignore the complexity of real historical conditions. In this struggle we will again find "the project" of "the avant-garde", later in the thesis.

The Khrushchovite transformation of the category of "formalism" to encompass "Stalinism" too is but the last chapter of this conflict, a conflict that evolves as the architectural debate in the Soviet Union develops from its inception in the early 20s up to this point. Looking at the discourse that supports this shift, however, we are confronted with a conceptual dilemma that would not arise if we would operate under the simple assumption that what was happening was, to use the conceptual framework of contemporary western architectural culture, a return to "modernism". Were we to stick to our framework, we would have difficulty integrating in it how the condemnation of the architecture of "the 20s" that characterized official Soviet architectural discourse from the early 30s to the early 50s is maintained, and there is no renunciation of the category of "socialist-realism", which is systematically perceived and presented as a method, not a style. The new expanded category of "formalism" would not see the rehabilitation of early "modernism", but would encompass both the production of "the 20s" and that of "Stalinist" architecture, and only what would be produced from then on would be free from such accusation. Khrushchov himself would address this directly, taking steps to clearly dissociate the new architecture that needed to replace "socialist-realism" from the still universally condemned experiments of "the 20s":

"Certain architects, putting up a smoke-screen about fighting constructivism, in practice sacrifice the advantages of internal planning and exploitation of buildings for the sake of exteriors, i.e. the sake of form, and thus show a contemptuous attitude to the urgent needs of human beings ... Buildings without towers, superstructures and columned porticos, and exteriors which are not

*decorated with stage effects, are called boxes and categorized as a throwback to constructivism.”*¹³³

This passage is translated from *Stroitel'naia Gazeta* by R. W. Davies, who first brought this material into the West with his 1955 article *The Builder's Conference* published in the journal *Soviet Studies*, using the term “structuralism” for the Russian word *Конструктивизм*. This term is here changed to the now conventional “constructivism”.¹³⁴ In 1955, the date of publication of his article, “constructivism” was not a well known term in English regarding the Soviet architectural production of “the 20s”. It became so only through two main groups of publications, the French and Italian accounts that take off in the 60s, and Anglo-American publications on the early “constructivist” movement in the visual arts, mainly from the 70s on. “Constructivism” becomes the central category of the Soviet “20s” already through Kopp, who identifies in the group OSA, which defined itself as “constructivist”, the epitome of “20s” architectural production. Kopp translates the Russian word to the French as *constructivisme*, and de Feo to the Italian as *costruttivismo*, respectively in 67 and 63. These translations have the advantage of being phonetically similar to the Russian pronunciation. “Structuralism”, however, is a perfectly adequate English translation, since the Russian *конструкция* is as close to the meaning of structure, physical or logical, as to that of construct or construction. It has the unfortunate disadvantage of facilitating confusion with the French school of human sciences, probably the main reason why it simply disappears as a translation after the end of the 50s.

As we've seen regarding “the avant-garde” in Part II, the term “constructivism” that preceded it is itself also an evolving historiographical construct. So much so that Kopp, recognizing this, feels the need to spend a couple of pages on a brief explanation, not so much of its history, but simply of the problem of its difficulty, before proceeding with the meaning attributed to it by the members of OSA.¹³⁵ Even clearer on this problem is Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, who in his seminal work *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture* of 1983 traces the use of the word not only in Russia but also in Western Europe in the first two decades of the

¹³³ From Nikita Khrushchov's speech at the Builder's Conference as published in *Stroitel'naia Gazeta*, 28 Dec.1954, in R. W. DAVIES, “The Builder's Conference”, in *Soviet Studies* Vol.6 Nr.4 (Apr.1955), pp.452-453

¹³⁴ Davies is careful enough to identify the transliterated original word in brackets, “konstruktivism”.

¹³⁵ Anatole KOPP, *Arquitectura y Urbanismo Soviéticos de los Años Veinte*, Editorial Lumen, Barcelona, 1974, pp.117-119

century.¹³⁶ His account is that “constructivism” originated in what he calls “leftist” art, established itself as a working group in Inkhuk - the Moscow Institute for Artistic Culture created as an association of leftist artists in 1920 - was formalized by Alexei Gan in his book *Constructivism* and taken to Berlin by El Lissitzky in 21, was regarded by many as a transitional concept to the later term of “production art” - that was espoused by the association LEF (Left Front of the Arts) that would run a journal of the same name from 23 on - was appropriated by architects such as Alexander Vesnin and Moisei Ginzburg, particularly in the later’s book *Style and Epoch* of 24, and would eventually come to be the term for the aesthetic school of the group OSA established in 25. What Khan-Magomedov does not narrate is how “constructivism” in the 30s and 40s went from being a specific school to being the overarching term with which architects later characterized the entire production of “the 20s”, and to which a return would be a bad thing, in the architectural debate of 54-55. This use of the term would extend over time and space up till today in Western architectural culture.

While de Feo, Kopp, and the later Khan-Magomedov understand “constructivism” as one of the specific schools of architectural thought operating in “the 20s”, it is quite clear from their narratives that they all believe OSA to be the most mature and accomplished of the early “modernist” groups, and with good reason, since its public image became overwhelmingly more powerful than that of its rivals, particularly ASNOVA, well up into the early 30s, essentially because of the academic presence of its members and to its regular publication of the journal *Contemporary Architecture* (*Sovremenniaia Arkhitektura*) between 1926 and 1930. Kopp would go as far as stating that:

*“the history of OSA (...) will tend to be mixed up with the history of contemporary architecture in general”*¹³⁷

In the context of his work, it is quite clear that Kopp is not producing a historiographical observation on how both histories got confused. He is instead proposing that the history of the development of early Soviet “modernism” is essentially the history of the development of a disciplinary culture that culminates with the “constructivist” group as its most mature expression. We will see how these foundational accounts of the Soviet “20s” forged the curious

¹³⁶ Selim O. KHAN-MAGOMEDOV, *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture: The Search for New Solutions in the 1920s and 1930s*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1987, pp.146-150

¹³⁷ Anatole KOPP, *Arquitectura y Urbanismo soviéticos de los años veinte*, Editorial Lumen, Barcelona, 1974, p.95

historiographical phenomenon that sees contemporary Western architectural culture import its terminology from the Khrushchovite USSR.

While Stefan Heym's Daniel Wollin fundamentally agrees with the Khrushchovite reapreciation of "socialist-realist" architecture, he fundamentally disagrees with the Khrushchovite refusal to establish a link between the new modern architecture and the "modernism" of "the 20s". This is a crucial disagreement between the debate of 54-55 and the histories written in the 60s. Kopp, who as we shall later see blames in the 1956 Khrushchovite manner the downfall of early "modernism" squarely on the "totalitarianism" of Stalinism, would in his *L'Architecture de la Période Stalinienne* of 78 vociferate against Khrushchov for his 1954 responsabilization of the architects for the excesses committed, stating that:

*"the party has once again resorted to a method it is used to: finding the scapegoats to present to public opinion in order to escape its own responsibility"*¹³⁸

This happens in the context of a decade in which "the 20s" were finally being rehabilitated – not the decade of the 54-55 debate in which Heym places *The Architects*, but the 60s in which he is actually writing it. In 1962, the 262nd issue of the Italian journal *Casabella-Continuità* is dedicated to Soviet architecture, giving great space to "the 20s", and inaugurating a Western interest on the subject. In 1963 de Feo publishes his *URSS: Architettura 1917-1936*. In 1964, the French journal *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* publishes a photographic study of Soviet architecture of "the 20s".¹³⁹ In 1963 the rehabilitation of constructivism begins in the USSR, with the publication, by the Academy of Sciences and the Institute of the History of the Arts, of the first volume of *Iz Istorii Sovetskoi Arkhitektury* (From the History of Soviet Architecture), dedicated to the years between 1917 and 1925, compiled and edited by Vigdariaia Khazanova and Kirill Nicolaevich Afanas'ev. In 1964, Khan-Magomedov's publishes one of his first works, the article *Traditions and Lessons of Constructivism*, in issue 9 of the journal *Decorative Arts of the USSR* (*Декоративное искусство СССР*). In the same year, this paper by Khan-Magomedov on Constructivism, showing a positive evaluation of the early period,

¹³⁸ Anatole KOPP, *L'Architecture de la Période Stalinienne*, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, Grenoble, 1978, p.357

¹³⁹ The study should have come as part of an article by Gheorghios Candilis on the architecture of that period, but the article was rejected for insufficient quality. This according to Stephen V. BITTNER, *The Many Lives of Khrushchov's Thaw*, Cornell University Press, New York, 2008, p.34

would be positively received by the Architectural Theory Section of the Moscow Section of the Union of Architects, sparking an effort by the Union to place “constructivism” in a more favourable light as the precursor to the new Soviet modern architecture.¹⁴⁰ In France and Italy the interest in this historical period persists and evolves. In 1967, Kopp publishes *Ville et Révolution*. In 1969, Vieri Quilici starts with his *L'Architettura del Costruttivismo* the series of Italian publications on the subject that will last the 70s. This process culminates with Kopp's publication of *Changer la Vie, Changer la Ville* in 75 and *L'Architecture de la Période Stalinienne* in 78, where the period of “the 20s” is very clearly defined as existing in direct opposition to “socialist-realism”, having been stopped, together with the fundamental social reforms of the revolutionary process, by the “Stalinist” dictatorship. Kopp's understanding of “constructivism” as the essence of “the 20s”, allied to the Khrushchovite transformation of the concept of “formalism” only in as much as it is applied to “socialist-realism”, will anticipate and define the contemporary established historiography that has extended the link between “the 20s” and a Soviet “return to modernism” portrayed by Heym in his 1963-65 novel all the way to contemporary Western architecture. This is the historical development of “the historiographical link” we have spent Part II addressing, and it comes supported by a new fundamental historiographical construct, based on Kopp's 1967 category of “the 20s”, which is in turn based on the pre-64 Soviet pejorative category of “constructivism”, but conceptually broader. This construct is the category of “the avant-garde”, which will grow, through the specific needs and constraints of the historiography of Soviet architecture, into the phenomenon we have been looking at since the start of this thesis.

¹⁴⁰ It might be a different paper however. Bittner mentions a paper entitled *On some of the problems of Constructivism* – it is unclear if it is the same. See:

Stephen V. BITTNER, *The Many Lives of Khrushchov's Thaw*, Cornell University Press, New York, 2008, p.133

2 – Two “Constructivisms”

The historical split

In the beginning chapter of this thesis we broke down the historiographical construction of the category of the Soviet “avant-garde” in architecture into two distinct phases. The first, between the early 60s and the late 70s, operated before “the avant-garde” has been made into the established category it is today. The second, from the 80s onwards, took hold of the novel category of “the avant-garde” recently theorised in other fields, and defined it at a historiographical level, solidifying its ideological function as a result. This is not to say that what we call the first phase is free of the ideological tensions inherent to the category. On the contrary, those tensions are structural to its development, to the point that “the avant-garde” showed up in the end of the 70s precisely as the mature conceptual articulation that facilitates the obfuscation of the contradictions of its “project” – the same “project” inherent to the cultural studies/cultural politics framework within which this whole historiography is built and which it serves.

We have seen in the past chapter how the structural characteristics of the category of “the avant-garde” were being formed in the Soviet mid-50s. Khrushchov’s denunciation of “Stalinist” politics comes associated to the denunciation of what tended to be called “socialist-realist” architecture as being just as “formalist” as the architecture of what today is called “the avant-garde”, which had been judged as such since the 30s. The historical object we call “the avant-garde” in architecture was already identified, as an all-encompassing meta-category that unites all the different trends and movements from the late 1910s to the early 1930s, but by the term “constructivism”. Subsequent historiographical efforts in the Soviet Union and Europe would rescue this term from its pejorative implications in the 60s – Khan-Magomedov’s first paper, De Feo’s and Kopp’s first books. And while these efforts, outside the Soviet Union, were careful to come up with the term “the 20s” for the same historical object, identifying “constructivism” as one of the trends that develops at the time, they did present “constructivism”, especially its later, mostly architectural manifestation developed by the group OSA, as the fully matured form of the underlying common characteristics that they believe are present in all the new movements of the time. This identification of a level of identity between different trends and movements pre-32 is itself an element of the critique that was levelled against them after 29 – the movements themselves would reject it, and did, particularly OSA.

So we see this identity first appearing from a hostile camp in the turn to the 30s, and consolidating around the term associated with the most prominent of the groups –

“constructivism”. We see the critique of it as “formalist” expanded in the mid 50s to the “monumentalism” that replaced it. And we see “constructivism” rehabilitated in the 60s, and “formalism” definitively stuck to the types of “socialist-realism” for ever after, particularly as the parallel political category of “totalitarianism” developed and came to be fused with the aesthetic via the category of “totalitarian art”. While the term “the avant-garde” was already being used in the early 60s, particularly in Italy, the historiography of Soviet architecture, and indeed architecture in general, throughout the West, generally did not work with it. “Constructivism” was the term used, and it unites not only all the developments in Soviet arts and architecture from the first pre-revolutionary experiments in the 1910s to the architectural precepts of OSA up to the early 1930s, but also all these Soviet developments to BAUHAUS, De Stijl, and other movements in Western Europe. The fundamental point that immediately unites them is naturally that, despite their more or less explicit level of politicisation, they are non-“totalitarian art”. As the historiographical line separating “constructivism” from “socialist-realism” – a line introduced by the critics of “constructivism” – was restored, after Khrushchov had blurred it, but from the inverse direction – now “constructivism” is good and “socialist-realism” is bad – the category became more precisely defined by virtue of existing *in opposition*. “Constructivism” as a category, early version of “the avant-garde” as a category, then starts to exist against “totalitarian art”.

The understanding that the perception of an identity that enables the umbrella term is historiographical does not mean that there are no actual, historical connections between all the distinct trends and movements grouped together under it. Indeed we have broached such relationships earlier and we will again, but they are fragmentary, difficult, and contradictory – in no way it is easy to simply establish such an over-arching historiographical categorisation to all these historical objects, as Stephen Bann so clearly showed us earlier through the inadequacies of his reading, where the central structure of his interpretation forced upon him basic empirical errors.

The difficulties inherent in this historiographical identity are indeed structural. These difficulties are present throughout the development of this historiography, and “the avant-garde” would rise as a solution of sorts, as said earlier, from the 80s onwards. It is in order to work through these difficulties that it’s useful to establish the division of this development in two phases. In each of them we can observe the development of a specific framework for the historiography of the Soviet “constructivism”/“avant-garde”. These two frameworks have approaches to architecture that differ in telling ways, and these differences manifest themselves in aspects as direct as the choice of what is included in the histories constructed. We will look at two paradigmatic publications that exemplify the distinction quite well, two translations to

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English of two early Soviet architectural books, both published by MIT at key moments of the two phases in question. El Lissitzky's *Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution* in 1970, and Moisei Ginzburg's *Style and Epoch* in 1982.

In 1982 the first translation, to a West European language, of a full book by Moisei Ginzburg was published by MIT. Of Ginzburg's three books, the translator, Anatole Senkevitch Jr., selected the second, *Style and Epoch*, as his crucial starting push to what would be a decade of intense publication on the Soviet architectural "avant-garde". The choice is significant. Ginzburg published *Style and Epoch* in 1924. He had published his first book, *Rhythm in Architecture*, one year earlier in 23, though the writing was probably mostly finished by January 22, the date in which the preface is signed.¹⁴¹ His third, *Housing*, was published only in 1934, the years in between being consumed by his prolific writing for the journal SA - *Sovremennaiia Arkhitektura* (Contemporary Architecture), the bimonthly journal of the group OSA (Union of Contemporary Architects) of which he was founder and vice-president from 1926 to 1930. *Rhythm in Architecture* is a formal treatise in the *Beaux-Arts* tradition of theory, even if it addresses architectural form through a modernist emphasis on movement. It is essentially an abstract geometric study, permeated with hand-drawn schematic representations of rhythmic compositions found in buildings, built with sharp *staccato* lines, which start with the single line and then build up through ever more complex associations of linear elements to a full analysis of what is presented as the fundamental principle of architectural composition. The book produces a linear, logical thesis on form, that shows a great control of classical and Italian renaissance references, and that is systematically applied to facades. Its ambition to find a scientific theory of form reminds one of the formal research the Suprematist group had just been doing in Vitebsk up till 1922 to produce the scientific laws of colour composition. Ginzburg's closing remark could easily have been said by Malevich, and would also fit early Nikolai Ladovskii, who would become the main theoretical rival of Ginzburg after 26:

"(...) the same problems become more complicated, the ways of solving them change, the elements that materialize the laws of rhythm - the artistic forms of architecture - are transformed. And of course, the task of modern architecture is to find these elements of form as well as the laws of their combinations through which the rhythmic pulse of our time is unveiled."¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ Moisei GINZBURG, *Le Rythme en Architecture* (Rhythm in Architecture), Infolio, Spain, 2010, p.23

¹⁴² Moisei GINZBURG, *Le Rythme en Architecture* (Rhythm in Architecture), Infolio, Spain, 2010, p.133-134

Housing, a book 12 years younger, is entirely dedicated to the problem of organizing social life in modes of collective dwelling, and part of the much more focused and pragmatic, even if fiercely debated and ideological, early 30s discussion on how to actually build in Socialism, at the time this became a real possibility with the stabilization of the Soviet economy and the acceleration of the five-year plans. The whole problem of formal composition had by then become subsumed by this deeper social concern, and the role of the architect had for Ginzburg moved away from that of the visual artist to that of the social engineer. In those 12 years, Ginzburg had formed an architectural group within LEF to fight the "rationalism" of Ladovskii's ASNOVA; he had created the group OSA advancing "constructivism" in architecture; he had become the leading theoretician of this group that through its journal SA and its presence in the Moscow academy had become highly influential in the Soviet architectural *milieu*; he had forwarded the "disurbanist" proposal for a reorganization of the territory that declared cities obsolete; and he had himself been put under attack by the subsequent group VOPRA that condemned "constructivism" and its "functionalist method" as excessively technical and detached from the political need to mobilize the Soviet people. By 1934, the exhilarated heroic optimism of his earlier pseudo-scientific work had morphed into a mostly technical concern over the realities of building for a new social organization in a country with an under-developed, but quickly developing, industry.

Style and Epoch, of 1924, however, is an entirely different object. Merely one or two years younger than the first book, it marks the shift into a whole different phase for Ginzburg and indeed for Soviet architecture. While the connections to the earlier work on rhythm are obvious, being deliberately focused on problems of architectural formal language, the mechanism through which these problems are presented is entirely different. It can be easily seen, and frequently is, as a Soviet counterpart to Le Corbusier's *Vers une Architecture* of 1923, and that would be correct. It is basically a contemporary - Ginzburg notes how the theses of the book had already been presented by him at a lecture delivered at MAO, the Moscow Architectural Society, in the 18th of May of 22, and *Vers une Architecture* is first published in instalments in *L'Esprit Nouveau* between 20 and 22. But being a Soviet counterpart to something Western usually comes with a twist. Its visual symbolism is more aggressive, in line with the experimentations that characterized the previous two decades in Russian visual arts. Instead of opening with an iron bridge, it opens with an airplane that finds its way into Le Corbusier's work only by the middle of it. Instead of a cruise liner roughly a third of the way in, it has a battleship in the second page. But these visual symbolic twists are secondary to the crucial differences in approach. Kenneth Frampton notes these and other, more scholarly distinctions in his foreword to the translation, like their different treatment of modern industrial

materials and of wood construction, while Anatole Senkevitch Jr. points out in his introduction other distinctions like Ginzburg's apparently more historically conscious treatment of the gothic. There is one difference they both see as fundamental - that of the understanding of the relationship between architecture and engineering. They both argue that while Le Corbusier maintains a clear disciplinary distinction between construction and art in building, between the technical requirements/possibilities of the machine-age and the aesthetic manifestation of its spirit, Ginzburg sees a total fusion of these two disciplines into one single body of praxis. This argument is true, but only a partial view. This fusion is advanced by Ginzburg in part 5 of the book, precisely where he introduces the category of "constructivism" in architecture. There he presents a reading of this relationship in a thoroughly disciplinary, and one should say theoretical, way:

*"The constructive scheme becomes a real spectacle for us [...]. Construction, as such, transcends itself; the constructive forces associated with the experiences of man's inner world create an organic world of form, making it a familiar and intimately understandable phenomenon; the analogy with the static and dynamic laws of the universe transforms this organic world into a powerful world of external forms [...]. Thus, the constructive system, by virtue of our perceptual experience and the psychological characteristics of the human being, gives rise to yet another system, one which is self-sufficient and at the same time proceeds from and is dependent upon the construction of the world of form - or, properly speaking, an aesthetic system. Moreover, in the paradigm which we have examined, both systems fully coincide. The very same element is simultaneously a utilitarian element of construction and an aesthetic element of form."*¹⁴³

He then goes on to explain how this relative autonomy of the aesthetic system goes on in the history of architecture to establish its own socially defined conventions, and how this history is essentially defined by a continuous tension in this relationship. So what he speaks about is not so much the relationship between architecture and engineering as much as it is an attempt to construct a functionalist theory of architectural language, where Le Corbusier's proposal remains essentially compositional, much like Ginzburg in *Rhythm in Architecture*. And indeed, this part 5 of the book happens after a part 3 where he makes his client manifest, where half a page stylistically marked by one sentence paragraphs points out how modern architecture must be for the working-class.¹⁴⁴ The idea of a "constructivism" inevitably as an aesthetic expression

¹⁴³ Moisei GINZBURG, *Style and Epoch*, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts and London, 1982, p.97

¹⁴⁴ Moisei GINZBURG, *Style and Epoch*, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts and London, 1982, p.78

of working-class politics in architecture is still timid, much more timid than in the visual arts - it would build up in the following two years until the formation of OSA - but it is a long way from Le Corbusier's appeals to industrialists and bankers as the embodiment of the new *zeitgeist*. But this is not all. It is immediately after dedicating modern architecture to the proletariat that Ginzburg makes clear that his understanding of architecture is crucially dependent on the design of the built environment to structure social life. The connection between this material design of social life and the historic role of the proletariat sparks here the first critical analysis of Western European architectural modernism by its Soviet counterpart, when Ginzburg states that:

*"[...] a significant number of workers' settlements is to be found in Europe at the present time. [...] However, the essence of these numerous solutions [...] reflects not a feeling for new form, but an absolute dependence on past cultures, one that emanates from the interpretation of housing as a palace [...]. What we unquestionably have here is not workers' housing as such, but ordinary housing for an economically disadvantaged segment of the population. The hypocrisy and aesthetic deception of such a solution [...] is especially apparent when one compares this solution to any of the actual manifestations of modern life [...]. Is this ideal [...] not the one embraced by the sentimental and individualistic bourgeoisie in the past?"*¹⁴⁵

It is important then to acknowledge Ginzburg's functionalist theory of architectural language as encompassing the constructive, "engineering" aspects of building, but also spatial, organizational ones. His understanding of constructive elements and constructive system are not limited to the injection of a machine-age aesthetic into architectural composition, but encompasses the organic planning of space for social activity. This becomes abundantly clear in the following part 6. While the characteristic statement of "constructivist" and "production art" discourse present in part 7:

*"The architect will then feel himself to be not a decorator of life, but its organizer."*¹⁴⁶

in itself does not add anything to the usual manifestation of "constructivist" principles that we can find in the mouth of painters, sculptors and cinematographers since 1920, his remarks in part 6 do:

¹⁴⁵ Moisei GINZBURG, *Style and Epoch*, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts and London, 1982, p.79

To be precise, Ginzburg here is attacking both Western production and that sponsored by MAO, the Moscow Architectural Society, where the new trends in architecture at the time being developed had not and would not enter.

¹⁴⁶ Moisei GINZBURG, *Style and Epoch*, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts and London, 1982, p.113

[...] the method for seeking new forms and the role of the modern machine aesthetic as a primary source of that method are indicated to a certain extent by an examination of modern engineering structures.

However, the gulf is still too great between the formal elements of the latter and purely architectural forms. Neither the machine nor the engineering structure provides us with an expressive spatial solution, one which constitutes a true manifestation of architecture.¹⁴⁷

Here lies the innovation of this book, an innovation that seems to escape Frampton. The last sections of it are still clearly imbued in the spirit of the artistic debates on the early years of the revolution, but they at the same time seem to be making a critique of it from the specific point of view of architecture. *Style and Epoch* then sits in the middle of a turn. In many ways, it opens that transition to architecture that puts that discipline “in the middle” in the historical development of “the avant-garde” as Tafuri sees it. It is still a part of the lively debate on the form of the new age that had defined the first half of the Soviet 20s in art, and begins the heated debate on the form of the built environment in socialism that would define the second half of the 20s and the early 30s within the architectural profession. It is the moment when the explicit category of “constructivism” is imported from the visual and performance arts into architecture, and this comes with a radicalization in meaning. To the re-organization of consciousness and life that “constructivism” advanced in the visual arts via theoretically vague, practically sculptural means since the adoption of the theories of “production art” in Inkhuk - the Institute of Artistic Culture in Moscow - in 1920, Ginzburg will in the following few years add the direct material re-organization of social behaviour via the total design of the built environment. No longer simply the grand, monumental aesthetic expression of modernity – which is in Russia increasingly synonymous with socialism – “constructivism” becomes about how to build housing, facilities, services, industry, administration, cities, territory.

There are then historical links and historical separations between this “constructivism”, which will be that of the group OSA, and that of the visual arts in the early 20s. The links may be less obvious than it might be expected. The term was in 1923-24 more or less widespread. Ginzburg mentions even that its meaning is not new:

“[...] especially as it applies to architecture, where the construction of an organism [...] has always played a paramount role in the evolution of form.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Moisei GINZBURG, *Style and Epoch*, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts and London, 1982, p.107

But apart from the more or less vague meaning of the word, specific connections between the "tradition of constructivism" as Stephen Bann called it in 1974 – that of the visual arts prevalent in the early 20s – and OSA are relatively few. There are two clear historical links. One is the person of Alexei Gan, the writer of the book/manifesto *Constructivism* published in 1922 and one of the most influential pseudo-theorists and ideological networkers of the period, who would become editor of the OSA journal *SA* founded in 1926. The other is Alexander Vesnin who, together with his brothers Viktor and Leonid, was probably the most important responsible for moving "constructivism" from the painting/sculpture/installation/stage-design representations of industrial material organization of life to architectural actual attempts to materially organize life at an industrial scale – he begins his work as part of Inkhuk in 1920 and founds both the architects' group in LEF and OSA with Ginzburg in 24 and 26 respectively. This post-24 period will be defined by a clear theoretical and practical autonomisation of the architectural debate.

Historiographical splits

The fundamental links and separations between these two "constructivisms" are not, however, the historical ones we just looked at, but historiographical. A clear historiographical separation will be constructed up till the mid-70s, as we shall now see. The link comes in the early 80s, with what we have identified as the second phase of this historiography. In 1982, when Anatole Senkevitch Jr. publishes his translation via MIT, Soviet early 20s visual arts "constructivism" was firmly established as a historiographical entity, part of the broader field of a Russian and early Soviet "avant-garde". Camilla Gray opened this field in the turn to the 60s, starting at first with an article in the journal *Soviet Survey* in 1959, and then moving into art journals with articles in *The Burlington Magazine* and *Typographica* in 1960. The first two address only painting, the third is the article on Lissitzky already mentioned much earlier in this thesis.¹⁴⁹ In 59, 61 and 62, three exhibitions in London presented this new topic to the public -

¹⁴⁸ Moisei GINZBURG, *Style and Epoch*, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts and London, 1982, p.96

¹⁴⁹ It was mentioned as one of the possible sources for Hadid's introduction to Lissitzky, though it was also stated that is doubtful since she probably used more recent sources. Regardless, this article defined Kenneth Frampton's later 1966 article in *Architectural Design*, thus serving as the first moment of contact architecture as a discipline has with

Kasimir Malevich, 1878-1935 at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, *Larionov and Goncharova*, organized by the Arts Council, and *Two Decades of Experiment in Russian Art: 1902-1922* in the Grosvenor Gallery. Camilla Gray was involved in the first two, and the first moved to the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome within 1959. It is not our aim here to go through the historiographical construction of this "avant-garde" in the arts. It is enough to place it in time and in general character. After the opening of the field, solidified with Gray's 1962 book *The Russian Experiment in Art*, the topic remained relatively dormant until, quite notably, the eves of 1968.

In this year the exhibition *L'Art d'Avant-garde Russe* opened in the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris, followed in 69 and 70 by *Aspects de l'Avant-garde Russe* and *Malevitch: Dessins* at the Galerie Jean Chauvelin. Galleria Breton in Milan also produced an exhibition on *Kasimir Malevich* in 71. Germany was ahead by one year, with the 1967 exhibition *Avantgarde Osteuropa 1910-1930*, organized by the German Society of Fine Arts and the Academy of Arts in Berlin, while the Nuremberg Biennale of 69 was devoted to what was called "constructive art", mixing art of the 20s with contemporary examples – foreshadowing Bann's later effort in 74. Galerie Gmurzynska in Köln would then produce a series of exhibitions on early Soviet art, with *Russische Künstler aus dem 20 Jahrhundert* in 68, *Osteuropäische Avantgarde bis 1930* in 71, and *Progressive Russische Kunst* in 73. Also in 1971 the Arts Council in London would organize *Art in Revolution: Soviet Art and Design since 1917* at the Hayward Gallery, and the Leonard Hutton Galleries in New York would launch *Russian Avant-Garde 1908-1922*, which catalogue will receive the notable contribution of John E. Bowlt, who started in that year his intensive stream of publications on Russian and Soviet early modernist art, with articles in *Art in America* and *Soviet Studies* in 71, in *Russian Literature Triquarterly* in 72, and in *Forum, Art News, The Slavonic and East European Review*, and *Apollo* in 1973. An avalanche of material on the topic was published after 68 in France, starting with issue 85-86 of the art journal *Cimaise*, entirely devoted to it, followed by articles in *Opus International*, *XX Siècle* and *VH 101* until at least 1972. In the UK *Studio International* published several articles between 69 and

this developing historiography of Soviet "avant-garde" visual arts in the English-speaking world. This will be addressed later.

71, and several New York based journals, including *Art News*, *Artforum*, *Art in America*, and *Arts Magazine*, followed suit from 71 to 73.¹⁵⁰

One of the most interesting things about this early 1970s, mainly Anglo-Saxon, historiography of "the avant-garde", from the perspective of a historiography of modern architecture, is how absent architecture is. This is especially noticeable in the books published during the period that still are the fundamental bases on which the contemporary understanding of the period is built. The very first, Camilla Gray's *The Russian Experiment in Art*, deals with every single artistic medium except literature – which has always had a large degree of autonomy as a discipline – and architecture. The author is very aware of this, and explains it quite simply:

"[The constructivists' ideas] led naturally to architecture, but this unfortunately was doomed to remain a paper-dream due to the economic distress of the country. It was not until the late 'twenties that it became possible to build more than exhibition stands or realize other than the most modest projects [...]"

The only obvious memorial to these early days of Constructivism actually realized in 1924 is Lenin's Mausoleum in the Red Square in Moscow. This was designed by Shchusev [...]"

*Few of the astonishingly pioneering projects of the Constructivist architects were actually built, for building on any scale became an economic possibility only in the later 1920s; by the mid-1930s Constructivism was officially out of favour since the establishment of the dogma of Socialist Realism in 1932 by the Communist Party."*¹⁵¹

Gray identifies "the avant-garde" in Russian arts between 1863 and 1922. This end date makes a degree of empirical sense, given the evolution of the situation around that date: Proletkult was integrated into the ministry of culture in 1920; The group Inkhuk, founded that same year, was disbanded in 24; Arts education was institutionalised with the foundation of the state school Vkhutemas in 1920 as well, and re-organised away from the studio model in 26; El Lissitzky left for his central European cultural missionary work in 21, and Malevich's UNOVIS ended up disbanded in 22. The date 1922 could be argued, but not by a very wide margin, once one understands Gray's focus is very clearly on the liberal arts, and this was a period defined

¹⁵⁰ The majority of the exhibition references are taken from the excellent compilations of sources present in John E. BOWLT, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902-1934*, The Viking Press, New York, 1976; as well as in Stephen BANN (Ed.), *The Tradition of Constructivism*, Da Capo Press, New York, 1974

¹⁵¹ Camilla GRAY, *The Russian Experiment in Art 1863-1922*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2000, pp.264-265

precisely by the arts becoming less and less liberal. One could make the case for a “transitional period from 20 to 26, between the foundation of Inkhuk and that of OSA, between the foundation of individual studio-focused Vkhutemas and its reorganisation into the more centralised institute Vkhutein. Gray makes it clear that the productivist ideology that dominates the circles she studies after 22, in Inkhuk and the Vkhutemas, and the architectural developments that follow, lie mostly outside her purview. This is also probably why this date makes sense for her purposes, despite the fact LEF is founded precisely in 22 and goes on in some form or other till 29 – the nature of “the avant-garde” changes around this date, from the understanding Poggioli makes of it, to the one Bürger does, and not only Gray in 62, but also the bulk of the Anglo-American historiography of the Russian and Soviet visual-arts “avant-garde” that would follow her till 73 – even those authors who, like Bann, focus on the “constructivist” ideology she mostly leaves out – are closer to Poggioli.

This change in nature is associated precisely with the progressive architecturalisation of “the avant-garde” Gray mentioned just above. Ending in 22, the bulk of the architectural debate and production, which is difficult to place before the 1923 foundation of ASNOVA, rests beyond her scope. She has limited knowledge of this debate and production. This is amply evident in her categorization of Shchusev's Lenin's Mausoleum as a manifestation of "constructivist" architecture, given that Shchusev, an established architect before the revolution and between 1922 and 1932 the president of MAO,¹⁵² even if he adopted elements of a modernistic language in the second half of the 1920s, was one of the main targets of the constructivist architect's critique - Viktor Vesnin would even come to call the eclectic trend in Soviet architecture in the early-30s "Shchusism".¹⁵³ And since "the avant-garde" as a global phenomenon is seen as ending with “socialist-realism” in 32, Gray naturally assumes that the architectural manifestation of it is scarce. What is worth noting here is how one can identify already, in this very first book introducing a Russian and early Soviet "avant-garde" to the 1960s West, a time-split between its manifestation in the visual and performance arts and in architecture. This time-split would become a huge historiographical split in the post-68 period, where the two historical "constructivisms" in the two fields would be presented with almost

¹⁵² Moscow Architectural Society, the most important pre-revolutionary association of architects in Russia, extinguished only in 32 together with all other groups.

¹⁵³ according to Selim O. KHAN-MAGOMEDOV, *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture - The Search for New Solutions in the 1920s and 1930s*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1987, p.263

complete independence. And quite remarkably, the historiography of “constructivism” in the visual-arts remained, for the duration, generally unaware of both the historical split inherent to its material and the historiographical split it is itself constructing. Indeed, one gets the impression that, throughout the 70s, all the authors of this whole body of historiography believed that they are covering architecture, while fundamentally missing the entire point of the architectural debate of the period, which is, precisely as Ginzburg showed earlier, an architectural critique on the fundamental positions of the earlier pre-23 debate in the visual-arts, and the posterior development of that critique within the architectural field – a critique that should be understood as that of “formalism”, as becomes explicit in the later 20s. The historians of the visual-arts, instead, perceived the very earliest quasi-architectural manifestations in the period they cover as being the architecture of “constructivism”, of their “constructivism”, missing the rest by virtue of disciplinary specialisation and therefore, missing the direction of the historical problem.

Gray's work would be continued by a few important works in the mid-70s, which followed and solidified in the English-speaking world the wave of exhibitions and articles in journals up till circa-73. One first precursor must be seen in the afore-mentioned MIT publication of the translation to English of El Lissitzky's book *Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution* in 1970. This is a notable book because it seemingly breaks the rule that has just been stated, being a somewhat architectural account of the period in this entire historiographical trend. Not simply because of El Lissitzky's book itself, which is ostensibly a short but comprehensive history of Soviet architecture from the early to the late 20s, but mainly because of the appendixes, comprising roughly half the book, which include a plethora of other texts by El Lissitzky and other authors more involved in the architectural debate during the Soviet 20s, translated from German publications that regularly covered this debate. This includes, among others, probably the first translation to English of a text by Ginzburg. Any architectural specificity this book has, however, is offset by a thorough lack of it in all other publications of the period concerning the Russian and early Soviet "avant-garde" in the arts.

Some of the most important examples of these are three collections of translated writings from the period – Stephen Bann's *The Tradition of Constructivism* from 1974, John E. Bowlt's *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902-1934* from 76, and the earlier *Russian Formalism: A Collection of Articles and Texts in Translation*, edited by both of them, from 1973. We've already dedicated quite some space to Bann's book, but we did not look past his own introductory text, and the contradictions found therein. We have not mentioned what exactly is the content of the book as essentially a compilation of period writings, and we should, for it is symptomatic. Bann presents 51 commented texts. Of them, the first 36 are translations

to English of material mostly in Russian, sometimes in Dutch or German,¹⁵⁴ that he considers part of this evolving tradition which has revolutionary Russia at its genesis, ending in the same year of 1932 where Gray places the rise of “socialist-realism”. The last 15 are presented as representative of the continuation of this tradition in the West, from 1930 to 1964. However, it is important to note that of the first 36, only six are dated after 24, and while five of these have a connection to architecture, none is a particularly relevant part of what is the architectural debate at the time: one is an article on constructivist cinema by Alexei Gan published in issue 3 of the OSA journal *SA* in 1928; another is a segment from the beginning of El Lissitzky's book of 1930,¹⁵⁵ and it is precisely the segment that focuses on the link between the Soviet arts experiments and architecture; two others are an extract from Yakov Chernikhov's *The Construction of Architectural and Mechanical Forms* of 1931, and another extract from the introduction to it by Erik Gollerbakh, this book being a very late sort-of-architectural expression of the visual arts trends of 1917-1922, being completely obsolete for its time; and the last of the five is a piece by Vladimir Tatlin explaining his *Letatlin* gliding machine when it was exhibited in 32. Bann does give us some notes on the architectural debate in his introductory comments to El Lissitzky's and Tatlin's texts. In the first he explains the groups ASNOVA and OSA and their conflicts, and in the second he gives the reader a glimpse of early 30s attacks on “constructivism”. But the selection nevertheless shows, as far as material from the late 20s/early 30s is concerned, a preference for that which is closer to early 20s experiments in visual arts over anything specifically architectural of the post-23 ASNOVA and post-24 *Style and Epoch* phase. The migration of “the avant-garde”, or of the “constructivist” tradition, from the visual arts to architecture, is absent. This pattern is repeated by Bowlt in 76, where sections from the same book by Chernikhov are the only representatives of both the early 30s and the discipline of architecture.

Two other books could be presented as relevant here. The first is George Gibian's and H. W. Tjalsma's *Russian Modernism: Culture and the Avant-Garde 1900-1930* from 1976, a collection of essays that is notable because it does cross the usual twin boundary that separates the historiography of “the avant-garde” in visual arts from both literature and architecture. It does this, though, coming from the side of literature, and Bowlt's contribution on the 1908-1914

¹⁵⁴ While Bowlt does the translations from the Russian, those from Dutch are by Nicholas Bullock and those from German by Bann himself.

¹⁵⁵ The book's title is there translated as *Russia: The Reconstruction of Architecture in the Soviet Union*.

artists' group "Union of Youth" is as much of a guest amidst the otherwise entirely on literature contributions as S. Frederick Starr's essay on OSA.¹⁵⁶ The second book is Robert C. Williams' *Artists in Revolution: Portraits of the Russian Avant-garde 1905-1925* from 1977, which, even though not a collection of short pieces by different authors, still adopts a fragmentary structure that allows the author to tackle diverse case-studies rather than offer an overarching narrative, and similarly, no artist he deals with is an architect from the second half of the 20s and early 30s, even while he has a chapter on Mayakovsky.

This separation between a historiography dealing with an arts movement that would last up till the early 20s, and another dealing with an architectural debate that would start at that time is not made entirely by lapse or ignorance, but also, to a lesser or greater extent, with some deliberation. These authors never really state explicitly that they will not deal with architecture and why - it can simply be assumed that it is due to the established disciplinary distance between fields of work – but they do occasionally show a degree of awareness of the field and of the historical distinctions between the two fields. John E. Bowlt, close to the end of the introduction to *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, mentions about constructivism that its:

*[...] compositions were as abstract and "artistic" as the pre-Revolutionary achievements of Tatlin [...]. Soon, however, under pressure from Proletkult and Inkhuk, the ideas of constructivism came to be applied to technological design [...], constructivism became utilitarian. The immediate result of this revision was the dynamic development of architectural and mechanical projects [...], constructivist concepts were incorporated into designs for textiles [...], the theatre [...], and typography [...].*¹⁵⁷

He then identifies this historical shift in the artists' groups that called themselves constructivists from traditional artistic expressions to realms of sort of applied arts, and notably to architecture. But two notes must be made. The first is that the work in textiles, theatre and typography is covered by him, and by this historiography of the "avant-garde" in general, to a much greater extent than the work in architecture. The second is that what the shift to architecture really entails is at the time still lost to him, given that among the three architectural

¹⁵⁶ S. Frederick Starr would publish in 1978 the first volume by an English-speaking author squarely focused on architectural matters, a monograph on Melnikov. He would not however focus the development of his work on architecture.

¹⁵⁷ John E. BOWLT (Ed.), *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902-1934*, The Viking Press, New York, 1976, p.xxxviii

works he in this text addresses, only Grigorii Barkhin's *Izvestiya* building is an actual building and representative of the architectural debate of the second half of the 20s and early 30s that has come today to be associated with "the avant-garde" in architecture. The other two are again Yakov Chernikhov, and, symptomatically, Malevich's compositions. It is then possible to assume that Bowlt believes an on-par coverage of architecture is being made, since Malevich's presence is overwhelming, and Chernikhov is, as we've seen, always present as a representative of architecture in the specific products of this historiography – probably precisely because his complete historical obsolescence in 31 facilitates the illusion that the terms of the pre-22 visual-arts debate lasted that long, which they didn't.

Stephen Bann is clearer and more conscious in this matter, in his introductory note to the segment of El Lissitzky's book in his *Tradition of Constructivism*, where he explains that:

"[...] by 1928 constructivist concern with the traditional forms of art was very much a thing of the past in Russia. Gan singles out architecture and cinema as the privileged directions of constructivist activity [...]."

*It is not possible here to try to sketch in any detailed terms the historical background to Gan's remarks. It might also be superfluous, since the history of Russian architecture in the 1920s has received considerable attention in the West during the past few years."*¹⁵⁸

This attention, in Britain, is relatively small, and it begins with the figure of El Lissitzky. The journal *Architectural Design* adhered to the start of the Soviet "constructivism" historiographical trend in its November issue of 1966. While up till then articles on Soviet architecture came up every once in a while dealing with contemporary production, in this issue Kenneth Frampton brought Camilla Gray's work on El Lissitzky to the specifically architectural awareness, admittedly as a follow-up to her 1960 article on him and to two exhibitions on El Lissitzky in 1965.¹⁵⁹ These bridge the gap between the early 1960s three London exhibitions and the post-1968 to early 1970s wave of exhibitions on the Russian and Soviet "avant-garde" in Europe and New York. The two exhibitions were a Kaestner-Gesellschaft retrospective that tours Europe and a later show at the Grosvenor Gallery.¹⁶⁰ Frampton's article though, despite being written by an architect in an architecture journal, sits squarely within the historiography of

¹⁵⁸ Stephen BANN (Ed.), *The Tradition of Constructivism*, Da Capo Press, New York, 1974, p.137-138

¹⁵⁹ Kenneth FRAMPTON, "The Work of El Lissitzky", in *Architectural Design*, Nov 1966, pp.564-566

¹⁶⁰ These two exhibitions are mentioned by Frampton himself in his 1966 article, but a full catalogue reference is not provided.

the visual arts "avant-garde", having very little architecture in it, as indeed would be expected of anything on El Lissitzky, whose architectural production was quite limited. El Lissitzky's contributions to the actual architectural debate in the Soviet Union in the period that would become associated to the category of the "avant-garde" are relatively small. The article narrates how he was part of that visual-arts "avant-garde" that gradually moved its experiments from painting into quasi-architectural sculpture, starting his work after the revolution in Vitebsk under Chagall and then Malevich. His post-1922 more "architectural" projects, starting with his horizontal skyscrapers for Moscow in collaboration with Mart Stam, were made within the environment of what Frampton characterizes as a central-European "constructivism", when El Lissitzky acted as a kind of Soviet cultural ambassador for this vague grouping between Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland, and were as such quite distanced from the Soviet architectural debate taking place all the way up to 28, when El Lissitzky returned to Russia to mostly become a designer of exhibitions. But owing to El Lissitzky's professional status as an architect, Frampton's article does manage to insert this "avant-garde" in a historiography of architecture for the first time. This will have significant repercussions in 1970, when the first major publication in English on Soviet architecture of the 1920s was launched, the MIT publication of Eric Dluhosch's translation of El Lissitzky's *Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution* of 1930.

“Linking” the split

Like Ginzburg's *Style and Epoch* from 1924, El Lissitzky's *Russia* too exists between the two "constructivisms", both historically and historiographically. But it seems to be an inverse proposition of Ginzburg's. While *Style and Epoch* was in 1924 constructing the historical separation, at the forefront of the specifically architectural manifestations of Soviet "constructivism" that will be historiographically separated from those of the visual arts quite clearly in the Western 70s; *Russia* in 1930 feels more like a look at the post-24 developments by a sympathetic Western outsider who is mostly out of the loop - and this is probably a good description of El Lissitzky's relation to Soviet architecture at the time, which in this particular case is compounded by the fact that *Russia* was published in Vienna, by the German art-historian Joseph Gantner as part of his series *New Construction in the World*. In 1930, the controversies in the architectural debate in Russia were nearing a climax. The first five-year plan was underway, and with it the first opportunities for the application of new architectural principles. Hostility versus the "constructivists" of OSA was ramping up. VOPRA had just been founded the previous year. The heroic/utopian OSA-sponsored disurbanist proposals had been

officially rebutted by a declaration of the Central Committee itself, published in the 23rd of May in the official party organ, the newspaper *Pravda*. The OSA 1929 attempt to unify all groupings into a single "Federation of Revolutionary Architects" had just become partially true with the establishment of VANO, the Scientific All-Union Association of Architecture, which had successfully integrated OSA – henceforth called SASS, Sector of Architects for Socialist Construction, a sector within the Moscow section of VANO – and ASNOVA as well as the ASNOVA-splinter group ARU – Union of Architect-Planners – but was met with resistance by the staunchly independent VOPRA.

Nothing of this transpires in El Lissitzky's 1930 book. The only contention present in *Russia* is still the OSA-ASNOVA conflict, which was by then extant. And he gets it over with within the first two sections, the very two Bann includes in his compilation. He explains in the first section, titled *Interrelationships between the Arts*, that:

"[...] much was accomplished in the realm of pure design ideas. [...] The elaboration of new methods for the scientific-objective elucidation of the elements of architectural design - such as mass, surface, space, proportion, rhythm, etc. – was decisive in establishing the distinctive character of the new schools.

*[...] This serious work on the basic elements of architecture called for the mobilization of all the vital energies available. A group was formed which placed the main emphasis on construction and which demanded the direct application of the methods of the engineer and the builder to architecture. Form was to result directly from construction."*¹⁶¹

El Lissitzky sums up like this the distinction between what he calls the "formalists" – his ASNOVA peers who had been the first "pioneers" – and OSA's "constructivists". And he won't go much more into it, preferring to take examples from the works of both groups to illustrate the latest developments in Soviet architecture. In the second section, *First Projects*, this distinction will still be shortly brought up on account of the projects El Lissitzky chooses to represent the first architectural experiments, the OSA Vesnins' *Leningradskaia Pravda* building of 24 and ASNOVA Melnikov's Soviet pavilion for the Paris World Fair of 25. But from there on, El Lissitzky will organize his book as a list of representative projects laid out according to their use – first housing, then workers clubs, sports facilities, educational and administrative buildings,

¹⁶¹ EL LISSITZKY, *Russia: an Architecture for World Revolution*, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts and London, 1984, p.30

moving on to considerations on industrial buildings – no projects of factories are included, probably because, for all the architects' admiration of them, they were generally not involved in their design – and finally the city. The book ends with brief considerations on architectural education and a few principles of the new architecture, which in the context of the Soviet debate in 1930 sound like little more than platitudes, but which probably are effective in showing the nature of the immediately post-24 Soviet architectural debate for the European audience the book is aimed at. And this is the crux of the matter. El Lissitzky wrote this book in 1930 in German, not Russian. *Russia* was not a contribution to the Soviet debate, but his last, and most architecturally specific, contribution to the dissemination of Soviet arts in the West. And just as it fulfilled its task in 1930 central Europe, it would fulfil its task in the 1970 English speaking world. The book is not meant to clarify the intricacies of the architectural controversies in the Soviet Union up till 1930. Indeed, it is very likely that El Lissitzky did not really understand them, having been away from them, both geographically and professionally, for the bulk of their duration. He never really was an involved part of any of the parties in conflict after 1923 - his membership of ASNOVA was quite distanced, him not having set foot in Russia since before its formation till 1928, when OSA had already *de facto* supremacy in the Soviet architectural *milieu* and was nearing a position to attempt, as it did one year later, the integration of all groups under its wing.

But the specific nature of El Lissitzky's distance to the Soviet architectural debate would possibly have given him an advantage in recognizing the differences between the issues present before he had departed Russia in 1921, and after he had returned in 1928. The transformations of these six years are those made manifest in Ginzburg's 1924 *Style and Epoch*, transformations El Lissitzky had not been a part of or witnessed directly. It is then curious to see how, in 1930, the same relative distance that makes El Lissitzky somewhat unaware of the main architectural controversies of the time, also makes him uniquely suited to reflect on how utterly distinct they are from the ones of 1921. The result is that El Lissitzky gives us in the first section a short passage that is perhaps the most explicit of the time regarding the historical difference between the two "constructivisms":

This effort [of Tatlin and what Lissitzky calls new architecture], as well as a later series of experiments with materials and models, gave birth to the term "constructivism". The present

*"constructivist" generation of professional architects looks upon this work as formalistic or even "symbolic". Later we shall return to this subject and take issue with this type of dialectic.*¹⁶²

This distinction should be for El Lissitzky quite clear, since he had been a prominent member of the first "constructivism", being particularly important in its European dissemination, while becoming after 1923 affiliated with the architectural group ASNOVA and therefore a rival of the OSA "constructivists" organized in 25. El Lissitzky then would be in a unique position to be, in 1970, an element of historiographical clarification in this regard, when, in the English speaking-world, a historiographical trend of the Russian "avant-garde" was establishing itself, but focused on the pre-22 visual arts, while the first steps towards a historiography of Soviet architecture after 23 were being made mostly elsewhere. But this would not be the case. This is made abundantly clear by Eric Dluhosch's introduction to his translation, where the contextualization of El Lissitzky's work mentions absolutely nothing that brings up these internal distinctions within what is vaguely seen as a Soviet artistic "avant-garde", even though the explicit use of this category is not present, as it would tend to be the case in the architectural historiography of the 70s. Neither the distinctions between the pre-22 artistic and the post-23 architectural trends, neither those within architecture after 24 that El Lissitzky comments on - albeit briefly - seem to be relevant for the 1970s British understanding of the period. El Lissitzky here is seen, as he had been in 1966 by Frampton, and as he would be in 1974 by Bann, as a general representative of a general distinctive period in Soviet architecture, which would exist as a somewhat linear evolution from, and as part of, an "avant-garde" in the arts, which had had a slow build-up since the last two decades of the 19th century, an apex immediately after the revolution in the 1920s, and an untimely end beneath the iron boot of totalitarian "socialist-realism" in 1932.

We can then see "the avant-garde" as a category emerging as directly connected to a system of historiographical distinctions. It would become present explicitly through the use of the term late in this period. The examples we have looked at allow us to place the generalisation of the term in 1976, when it is used in its umbrella function in the titles of both books published in that year – Bowlt's *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde* and Gibian and Tjalsma's *Russian Modernism: Culture and the Avant-Garde*. Before 76, the term can be found with such

¹⁶² EL LISSITZKY, *Russia: an Architecture for World Revolution*, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts and London, 1984, p.29

prominence only in two exhibitions in 71, one in New York and the other in Berlin, amidst the myriad of exhibitions and journal articles on the topic that populated the post-68 period. This does not mean the term was not in use earlier – because it was – just that it had not yet gained its generalised conventional function as signifier for the historiographical meta-category, nor as carrier of the “historiographical link” to the present of the historian.¹⁶³

But regardless of the specific moment when the term gains general use, the object that Tafuri calls the “historical avant-garde” was becoming an operative object at this time and through the development of this specific historiography. What we note is how the two “constructivisms” are simultaneously separated and joined together through the development of two independent bodies of historiographical work – that which deals with pre-22 visual arts, developed mainly in Anglo-American circles, and that which deals with post-23 architecture, developed mainly between Italy and France.

These two historiographies don’t mix, and therefore, in what could seem like a paradox, actually end up diluting the tensions and distinctions internal to the meta-category – regardless of the term in use – because they are never really forced to address them. Two different and even conflicting trends are labelled “constructivism” and perceived as being the same thing, and the historiographical line separating such “constructivism” from the production of the “Stalinist” period is universally accepted. This is, interestingly, precisely the same set of historiographical lines originally established by the proto-“socialist-realist” critique of “constructivism” in the 30s – for whom “constructivism” was “formalist” and what came next was fundamentally different and not-“formalist” – and attacked by the Khrushchovite conceptual re-organisation in the 50s – for whom everything till the mid-50s was joined together in “formalism”, therefore blurring the distinction between “constructivism” and “Stalinist” architecture. The restoration of the “Stalinist” system of historiographical lines in the West after the 60s came with an inversion of the value judgement however – associated to the inversion of the category of “formalism” – and this new value judgement is organised at both an aesthetic and political level. The two levels are, however, not easily matched, and indeed, the

¹⁶³ The term is indeed used a few times in most writings on the subject before 76. We can see it in Gray and Bowlt, and while Bann practically does not use it, we have seen already how he is one of the first clear articulators of the “historiographical link” while sticking to the term “constructivism”. This historiography tends already towards the grand ideological function of “the avant-garde” since the beginning. This simply takes some time to crystallise around an explicit operative concept.

two western historiographies of the two “constructivisms” have clearly different priorities, priorities that, interestingly, match the priorities of the specific “constructivism” being addressed. These priorities manifest themselves historiographically as diverging genealogies of “the avant-garde”. Indeed, while the two historiographies agree on the lack of precise lines – both chronological and theoretical – within the meta-category of “constructivism”, and on the very clear line between this meta-category and the imposed-from-above “Stalinist” trend that marks its end, they do not have the same historiographical line defining when the meta-category starts. The separate genealogies come, in addition, with specific understandings of how any political/ideological character of “the avant-garde” is articulated. Generally speaking, the Anglo-American historiography of the pre-22 visual-arts “constructivism” privileges inherent aesthetic judgement and associates it to an art-historical genealogy extending into the late nineteenth century, while the continental historiography of post-23 architectural “constructivism” privileges political meaning and associates it to a political genealogy defined by the October revolution. Thus the way historiographical lines are drawn has direct relevance to the possibilities of conceptualising the category of “the avant-garde” not only at a historiographical level but also at a theoretical one. This becomes manifest as we go through the diverging genealogies, and the ways in which the implicit political character of “the avant-garde” manifests in each of them.

3 – Drawing Lines I: The Problem of Origin Stories Art v Politics

Splitting lines

Stephen Bann states, in his introductory comment to his chosen extract of El Lissitzky's *Russia*, immediately after his remark on the considerable attention Soviet architecture had recently received in the West (quoted a few pages above):

“But there remains a necessity to identify at least the bare bones of the situation [of Russian 1920s architecture]. And this is particularly so because there seems to be widespread disagreement about where the lines are to be drawn - and indeed which lines are to be used.

In brief, there is a strong tendency, encouraged by Russian architectural historians, to treat the entire range of Russian modernist architecture in the 1920s under the general heading of constructivism. By contrast, there is also the tendency, well represented by Anatole Kopp, that lays stress upon the bitter polemic between two schools - ASNOVA and OSA.”¹⁶⁴

This is possibly the most explicit posing, by an agent of the period, of the historiographical problem we are now dealing with – that of what Bann calls the drawing of lines, of deciding periodisations. Bann makes here a distinction between two systems of “lines” existing within architectural historiography, a distinction separate from the one we just identified in the previous chapter between architectural and visual-arts historiography. Despite the fact that he is not a specialist in the architectural field, Bann shows here that he is aware not only of the Kopp version of the history of Soviet Architecture, which at the time is limited to his first book on “the 20s”, but also of the polemics in Russia surrounding “constructivism” as a category that we started Part II with. In 1974, two decades had passed since the rebuttal of what was deemed “Stalinist” architecture, henceforth considered “formalist”, and one decade since the rehabilitation of “constructivism”, henceforth considered no longer “formalist”. But, as Bann notes, “constructivism” remains in the Soviet Union the umbrella category for all that happened in architecture up till the definition of socialist-realism as the official line. We must note here two points:

¹⁶⁴ Stephen BANN (Ed.), *The Tradition of Constructivism*, Da Capo Press, New York, 1974, p.138

The first point is that to claim this state of affairs of the architectural version of the meta-category is present in 74 in the Soviet Union is both true and false. Soviet historiography already made by then the same distinction between the “constructivists” and the “rationalists” Kopp operates under, and Bann should be aware of it since this was made clear in English publications already in 1970.¹⁶⁵ This does not mean, however, that the meta-category doesn’t continue in some vague form, there being a need to identify the period that is the focus of increasing historiographical interest, and this meta-category would come in this context to extend itself to the West, from the moment Bann is writing onwards, while shifting the dominant term.

The second point is that this partially true claim Bann makes for the Soviet historiography of Soviet architecture is the exact same claim this thesis is making for the Anglo-American historiography of Soviet visual-arts. Both produce the meta-category in the most general sense, lacking internal lines, and clearly establishing one line separating “constructivism” from what comes next.

There is, however, one line Bann doesn’t address in his comparison. That is the first line, the one that defines the beginning, and on this line the comparison fails, for on this line, both Kopp and the Soviet historians agree – the line is the Revolution of 1917. And this is the line on which the Anglo-American historiography of the visual-arts, of which Bann is an agent, doesn’t agree – their line is more of a fuzzy area extending into the last couple of decades of the 19th century.¹⁶⁶

Thus we have a system of three types of lines, and three bodies of historiographical work. The historiographies are the Anglo-American visual-arts historiography, the European continental architectural historiography, and the post-60s Soviet historiography. The types of lines are those that define the start of the category, those that define the end of the category, and those that define internal divisions within the category. Each of these historiographies

¹⁶⁵ Particularly, in issue 2, Vol.40 of *A.D.*, dedicated to Soviet architecture of the period, and in the subsequent *Building in the USSR* by Oleg Shvidkovskii in 1971. These will be addressed in this chapter.

¹⁶⁶ Although Bann in *The Tradition of Constructivism* only starts in 1920, and as we have seen above the line he fuzzies is the end line that he extends all the way to his present. He is, however, a crucial part of the broader Anglo-American historiography that develops in the early 70s, which, as the previous chapter has shown, stretches its object into the 1880s. Even Bann himself, in his collaboration with Bowlt on *Formalism*, begins in 1914.

establishes a different relationship to each of these lines, and these relationships carry important political connotations.

The end line is generally consensual for everyone. Regardless of the more or less political understanding of the nature of the new trends, they are unequivocally perceived as being crushed in the early to mid-30s. For the more politicised Soviet and Western continental historiographies of Soviet architecture, this corresponds to a betrayal of the revolution, be it in the Trotskyite explicit interpretation of Kopp or the Khrushchovite more toned down interpretation of the Soviet agents. For the Anglo-American visual-arts historiography, this means politics crushing artistic liberty. The stark difference of these two positions may not be clear in our present, when post-80s liberal discourse has depoliticised politics itself and therefore managed to merge the two narratives, but in the 60s and 70s the two readings cannot be confused. There is however an important exception to the consensus over the location of this line – the Italian branch of continental historiography does not grant it the same relevance. We will look at this further ahead.

The existence of middle lines is somewhat more complex. Of course, all of the three historiographical bodies deal with diverse historical materials and agents and sub-categorise them to some extent. What Bann perceives in Kopp that he doesn't perceive in the Soviet narrative is a function of this – Kopp makes a clear sub-categorisation of ASNOVA's "rationalists" and OSA's "constructivists", while the Soviet historiography, still mostly concerned with the rehabilitation of "constructivism" as the meta-category for the period, was only starting to do the same – this would become clearer as the work of Soviet historians would begin to pile up.¹⁶⁷ The point however, is on the comparative relevance of these sub-divisions, for in no case are they truly structural to the understanding of the period, even in Kopp, who sees, as mentioned before, OSA's constructivism as the mature form of the architectural ideas that define "the 20s" in general. Bann gives significant importance to Kopp's distinction because, as we've seen, Bann keeps confusing, as Poggioli would put it, "the word and the thing", not fully realising that the historical architectural "constructivism" Kopp speaks of, the historiographical meta-category "constructivism" of the embryonic Soviet post-60s narrative, and the historical visual-arts "constructivism" he himself tackles, are three different things.

¹⁶⁷ Vighdaria Khazanova had published in 1970 the pioneering *Soviet Architecture of the first years after October*. Selim O. Khan-Magomedov's first book on "constructivist" architecture, *Architect Ivan Leonidov*, had been published in 1971, followed by *Moisei Guinzburg* in 72.

Indeed, the safest thing that could be said about the state of middle lines in the 60s-70s historiographies of the Soviet “avant-garde” is that they exist in the most thorough confusion, the greatest of which is undoubtedly on the term “constructivism” and its multiple significations, which cannot be fully grasped outside of the set of clear historiographical distinctions this thesis has produced in the previous chapter. In addition to this, other distinctions that could easily be seen as internal, like that related to the 1929 rise of the group VOPRA, are in most histories associated with the end line, and their entire perception cannot be addressed outside of the framework that the totalitarian determination of the end of “the avant-garde” imposes. This association also will be later addressed.

Finally, as we’ve seen, the beginning line is agreed upon by the Soviet and Western continental historiographies of Soviet architecture to be the political events of 1917, and pushed back by the Anglo-American visual-arts historiography into the artistic innovations of the late nineteenth century. This difference is, in many ways, the same that Schulte-Sasse found between Poggioli and Bürger in their periodisations of “the avant-garde” – one addresses the new trends as rebellions against the existing artistic establishments, the other focuses on the more radical denunciation of “art-as-institution” in its entirety and the subsequent ideology of “art-unto-life”, that is to say, the explicit politicisation of the field. The tribulations of the historical path the Western historiography of the Soviet “avant-garde” will take towards depoliticisation begin with this distinction, a distinction between liberal notions of artistic freedom of Anglo-Americans who see artistic innovations coming from within art itself (with minor intervention of politics as “context”), and the leftist “project” of cultural revolution of Kopp, constructed on top of an explicit Trotskyite historical reading.

Anglo-American art-history

It’s been mentioned earlier that the effort to historicise the cultural production of the early Soviet period expands into the English-speaking architectural circles first in 1966 with Kenneth Frampton’s article on El Lissitzky in that year’s November issue of *Architectural Design*.¹⁶⁸ As was said, this article, despite being written by an architect in an architectural journal, has very little architectural specificity to it, functioning fully within the established visual-arts narrative that it explicitly comes from, namely the El Lissitzky-focused articles and exhibition that

¹⁶⁸ Kenneth FRAMPTON, “The Work of El Lissitzky”, in *Architectural Design*, Nov 1966, pp.564-566

preceded it.¹⁶⁹ For a more architecturally specific approach, the material covered would have to grow away from its El Lissitzky/visual-arts inception, and this would come through the first large injection of work by Soviet historians into the Western narrative – an injection that throws a significant amount of empiric material into the mix, but that doesn’t really significantly change the nature of the substance. The difference in the way the emerging Anglo-American visual-arts historiography and the Soviet architectural one deal with the beginning line remains unaddressed, probably because of simple disciplinary specialisation. Since the two historical “constructivisms” are dated differently – the visual-arts one up till 22-23, and the architectural one after that – the two historiographical “constructivisms” tend to intersect around that date. Visual-arts narratives effectively end after 24, with only weak semi-architectural objects lasting past it like El Lissitzky or Rodchenko, and tend instead to present the works of “constructivism” as coming from a continuity of formal innovation dating as far back as the 1860s, in the exact same way Poggioli dates his category of “the avant-garde”. Architectural narratives can be satisfied with establishing a continuity between the two “constructivisms” by presenting the innovations in the visual-arts as precedent for those in architecture (while never addressing the empiric difficulties this thesis proposes as inherent to such historiographical operation) and for this they don’t need to go further back than Tatlin, El Lissitzky or Malevich, therefore staying more or less within the post-revolutionary timeline, which places the understanding of the meta-category closer to, not really the radical anti-“project” one of Bürger, but certainly the post-political cultural “project” one of Schulte-Sasse. As it developed, the problem of the Western narrative would be to manage to reinforce the second, while avoiding any Bürger-like consequences.

This may not have been immediately apparent, however, when Soviet material first began to pour into the English-speaking architectural circles. This happened four years after Frampton’s first 1966 El Lissitzky foray, and in the same year MIT published the English translation of El Lissitzky’s *Russia*, right at the onset of the wave of exhibitions and articles dedicated to late Russian and early Soviet visual arts that goes on till 73, and before any of the major books on the subject. It happened in the February issue of 1970 of *A.D.*, guest edited by Oleg Shvidkovskii, deputy director of the Soviet Institute of Art History, coinciding with the organisation, by Camilla Gray, of the landmark exhibition *Art in Revolution: Soviet Art and*

¹⁶⁹ These too were mentioned before, in page 113 of this thesis.

Design since 1917 at the Hayward Gallery in London. This is the major moment when what would come to be known as “the avant-garde” becomes architectural in English speaking circles. This is not to say these circles were in the dark regarding Soviet architectural developments. Every once in a while these were covered, but in a journalistic, as opposed to a historical, manner, keeping the British and Western publics more or less aware of what was going on. This issue is the first to clearly place itself as an attempt to historicise Soviet architecture, and in so doing, focusing squarely on the period that would become universally known as that of “the avant-garde”. There are other manifestations of the same interest, like issue 9 of *RIBA Journal* of 1971, with an article by Dennis Sharp dedicated to “constructivism”, or the exhibition *Art and Architecture, USSR: 1917-1932*, launched in Delf at the Technische Hogeschool af Bouwkunde, then travelling to Berlin, Harvard, and Princeton between 1969 and 1970, ending in 1971 at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in New York, with Max Risselada and Kenneth Frampton at the head of the catalogue.¹⁷⁰ But this issue of *A.D.* is notable because it has one important difference from each of the two historiographical bodies then at play in the West – it differs from the then emerging Anglo-American visual arts historiography for its resolutely architectural direction, close to the one that dominated continental efforts; and it differs from the continental architectural historiography, especially the work of Kopp, in the measure that it is typical of English language publications of the 70s, in being a very empirical and disciplinary, mostly apolitical approach.

This issue, under the heading *Building in the USSR 1917-1932*, is comprised entirely of contributions by Soviet scholars who are leading the research on “constructivism” in the wake of its 1964 rehabilitation. Its structure is quite simple – after a general review of the period by Khan-Magomedov, and a short description of the architectural organizations that originated in the period by Vigdaria Khazanova, follows a series of focused texts, the first two on the schools UNOVIS and Vkhutemas, the others each on one selected “constructivist” architect.¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰ Only a bit later, in 1974, too late to be of consequence to the bulk of the post 68-early 70s historiography, a very significant volume will be published by the University Press of Virginia, Anatole Senkevitch Jr.'s first publication on Soviet architecture, a comprehensive bibliographical guide titled *Soviet Architecture 1917-1962*. This book's contribution is in line with the “factualist” approach seen in the *A.D.* of Feb. 1970, but takes it to a level that already foreshadows the development of a broader, much deeper, and more critical Anglo-American historiography of Soviet architecture in the 80s.

¹⁷¹ Or two at the same time in the case of the Golossov brothers. It should also be noted that one text is on Nikolai Miliutin, definitely not an architect though an important name in the architecture circle.

Shvidkovskii's own book, published the following year in London with the same title, is essentially identical.¹⁷² This method of presentation, in seeming to be concerned more with the introduction of "facts" than with the construction of a historiographical narrative, has advantages that would become more evident as the years went on and Anglo-American circles took centre stage in the Western interest in the topic. The empirical focus enabled, already in 1970, a healthy level of scepticism in the treatment of the continental narratives, which becomes quite evident in the short reviews *A.D.* publishes of the two most relevant books on the subject at the time, Kopp's *Ville et Révolution* and Vieri Quilici's *L'Architettura del Costruttivismo*. Robin Middleton's review of Kopp makes not only the empiric accusations of "inadequate" research and "omitting" "important items", but also the more fundamental accusation of "tendentious" interpretation. He identifies this tendentiousness, however, in putting excessive emphasis on the enmity between OSA and ASNOVA, and in disregarding the international context and its interactions with the Soviet situation, which speaks to the Anglos' own tendency of preferring an even greater smoothing of internal divisions within the historiographical entity of "the avant-garde", as opposed to challenging the difficulties of the emerging meta-category.¹⁷³ This challenge, by contrast, is left at least implied by Joseph Rykwert's review of Quilici, where he focuses on the need to examine the lines that divide "the avant-garde" from what exists outside of it. He critiques mainly the absence of a proper background on the pre-existing architectural situation in Russia, as well as of the history of its continued existence after

¹⁷² The notable difference from the *A.D.* February 1970 issue is the introduction of two additional texts on relevant figures that were left outside of it, namely the Vesnin brothers and Konstantin Melnikov.

Oleg SHVIDKOVSKII (Ed.), *Building in the USSR 1917-1932*, London Studio Vista, London, 1971.

¹⁷³ Robin Middleton was the technical editor at the time. He grounds his critique of the excessive emphasis on the hostility between OSA and ASNOVA on a particularly weak example, El Lissitzky's friendly terms with Ginzburg as evidenced in letters he no doubt accessed in the compilation edited by El Lissitzky's widow and published in 1968. As we've seen, El Lissitzky, despite being a member of ASNOVA, was hardly a serious contender in the power struggles going on within Soviet architectural institutions, being away from the country, and therefore would have no difficulty maintaining friendly terms with most people. Even then, Kopp isn't overly concerned with personal enmities, but with structural ideological disagreements, that he identifies mainly between the leaderships of OSA and ASNOVA, as well as other groups such as the leftovers of UNOVIS earlier on and VOPRA later. If personal feuds were to be found between Ginzburg and someone else, it would be with Malevich (and there is a good chance of that, given the scathing critique of him in the OSA journal), or Ladovskii.

Robin MIDDLETON (identified by initials), review of *Ville et Révolution*, in *Architectural Design*, Vol.40 Nr.2 (Feb. 1970), p.108

the Revolution, and asks for a future effort in writing a history of the architects of that previous generation as well as of what he calls “the allied activities of VOPRA”.¹⁷⁴ This explicit naming of VOPRA is remarkable for two reasons. First, it asks for a more thorough history of it on its own merits, which is something that is, alas, yet to be done in 2017, as opposed to the more detailed historicisation of the classicist architects, which would be done over time and play an increasingly greater role even in the grand narratives of Kopp or Khan-Magomedov, where they, unlike VOPRA, are even treated with a degree of sympathy.¹⁷⁵ The second reason is that Rykwert still views this third group under the spell of the early interpretations he is criticising, by simply presenting it as an ally of the older classicists, even though he had already access to the fact that VOPRA had been extremely hostile to the pre-revolutionary classicists from its inception. He had access to this fact through Kopp himself, despite it being the undisputable broad interpretation of his, in the very same book, that this group of “opportunists” does come to align with the “reactionary” classicists. This speaks to the power of historiographical grand constructions, such that simple facts cannot contradict them in and of themselves. The empirical approach that characterises this *A.D.* issue – and the Anglo-American approach in general – remains insufficient to address the structural contradictions of the narrative, and would instead tend towards strengthening them through avoidance. The fundamental problem that this approach cannot but deepen lies on the way the articulations between disciplinary and political developments are understood.

One of the relatively immediate observations one can make of the early 70s Anglo-American historiography of late Russian and early Soviet arts, that extends to this historiography’s few incursions into architecture, is how this seeming neutrality of interpretation manages to make the political situation, which is central in the discourse of Soviet architects of the 20s no matter where we read it, a historiographical footnote. Of course, Khan-Magomedov places in the beginning of his overview the revolutionary developments in architecture as coming in the context of the revolutionary developments in politics. Still, and

¹⁷⁴ Joseph RYKWERT, review of *L’Architettura del Costruttivismo*, in *Architectural Design*, Vol.40 Nr.2 (Feb. 1970), p.108

¹⁷⁵ Generally presented as honest architects of an older time who have no interest in politics and have significant technical competence, even if they do carry a bourgeois understanding of the role of the discipline to the historical point where it would be re-used by the emerging totalitarian counter-revolution. It is on VOPRA that the historiographical bile is poured, as the very agents in architecture of this totalitarian counter-revolution.

despite the architectural focus, it is the link to the visual-arts pre-22 experiments that remains in *A.D.* as an alternative historiographical basis, virtue of the inclusion of UNOVIS and, once again, El Lissitzky, as part of the "constructivist" architectural ensemble. This is the point where it becomes important to read the inclusion of the visual-arts as a historiographical alternative to politics. It may not seem so in the present, after the visual-arts and the architectural historiographies have been merged and quasi-politicized. But as we've noted earlier, in the 70s the historiographical narratives of the late Russian and early Soviet visual-arts "avant-garde" are a body of work that sees and describes a growing culture that extends as far back as the 1860s. This is explicit in Gray, Bowlt, etc., and "the avant-garde" there does not depend one bit on the revolution. Instead, it is a historical trend that evolves, much like in the West, in an ambiguous relationship to political developments, being more "caught" by the revolution than an actual part of it, and being, in fact, essentially bourgeois in origin.

While this all-Soviet issue of *A.D.* is much less a carrier of this historiographical extension than the Anglo-American visual-arts narratives are, it still functions within the and reproduces the ambiguities they cause. This is all the more clear when one looks at the contemporary continental alternative narratives that are architecturally focused, where social-political issues take centre stage.

Continental politics

We have already noted how we can identify two main efforts in historicising Soviet architecture in continental Europe – Kopp in France, and a collective body of work in Italy. In order to perceive the radically different nature and consequences of the "origin story" in them as compared to the one dominant in the English language, we will have to take a quick look at the way they address it, and we will do it by focusing on the two volumes that lie at the origin of each of the two historiographies. These are Kopp's *Ville et Révolution* of 67, and while de Feo's *URSS: Architettura 1917-1936* of 63 is more often referenced, we will skip it – since it would actually add little to Kopp – and instead look at the noteworthy issue 262 of *Casabella Continuità* of the previous year, an issue with which a comparison to the February 1970 issue of *A.D.* is quite enlightening.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁶ In January 1970 the French journal *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* also dedicates an entire special issue to Soviet architecture. However, it does not function along the same lines, being focused on contemporary Soviet production

Issue 262 of *Casabella-Continuità* is entirely dedicated to Soviet architecture in its entirety. That is to say, it provides an account of the history of Soviet architecture and its debates from its artistic and political inception to the contemporary moment, putting special emphasis on the critiques and turns of policy that mark its development. By its nature, this issue lies on the border between the more or less regular updates on latest architectural news from the other side of the curtain that periodically show up in Western journals, and the historiographical trend that is to follow focusing on producing a history of Soviet architecture, and within it focusing on what will be called "the 20s" by De Feo and Kopp. From here, it is useful to produce a further, finer distinction between Kopp and the Italian historiographical tradition, both of which have up till now been grouped under the umbrella of a continental architectural historiography. The Italian tradition will remain largely autonomous, and seldom quoted by others. While the first two books it produces, De Feo's 1963 *URSS: Architettura 1917-1936* and Quilici's 1969 *L'Architettura del Costruttivismo*, will be influential for Kopp and for the Anglo-American historiography of "the avant-garde", from then on the clear focus of the Italian historiography are the problems relating to the city, and the architectural debates will systematically be seen from that perspective. This puts it quite at odds with Kopp's view of the same phenomena, despite both functioning roughly within the same, politics-driven, approach. Even if Kopp's first book is ostensibly on the "city", having it paired with the "revolution" in the title and presenting a narrative that builds up to the confrontation between Ladovskii-like

and not on a historicisation of Soviet architecture since its inception. The historical "avant-garde", as well as that of the "Stalinist" period, are not present. Thus we cannot be so fortunate as to judge the particularities of the historiographical narrative in Britain, France and Italy always through the same medium of a special issue of a leading architectural journal.

This issue of *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* however, given its extension and thoroughness, is useful in ascertaining what are the dominant trends in Soviet architecture precisely at the time when "constructivism" has finally been fully rehabilitated. It is not surprising to see Georgii Gradov, head of department of the Institute of the Architecture of Public and Industrial Buildings of the Academy of Architecture at the time of the Builders Conference in 1954, and one of the more outspoken advocates for the historiographical rehabilitation of "constructivism" then and since, lead in 1970 with experimental projects for housing that establish, in the first few pages of this issue, the tone for the aims of Soviet architecture.

It should be noted that, while it remains unaddressed, this issue shows a remarkable lack of communal housing. The problem Soviet architects are focusing on then is technological and at the level of urban design towards densification and towards optimisation of use of public space. The challenge to the individual family apartment, that highest of flags for the 20s "avant-garde", had been silently left behind.

“urbanists” and Ginzburg-led “disurbanists” as the ultimate manifestation of the post-revolutionary architectural debate, actual operative problems surrounding planning are generally absent, and always perceived from the point of view of architecture as producer of artifacts. How even those gigantic and quite abstract conceptions such as “urbanism” and “disurbanism” constitute architectural cultural artifacts as well becomes painfully evident precisely as we compare a historiographical interpretation that revolves around them with one that essentially ignores them. And we quickly see that the operativity of the very category of “the avant-garde”, as far as architectural history is concerned, inevitably ends up, in such context, in grave danger of being exposed as ideological.

The Italian journal’s issue is remarkable for several reasons. Firstly, it is contemporary to the original interest on the Soviet visual-arts “Avant-garde” led by Camilla Gray in the UK, and therefore manages to not depend on it at all. This is not to say that the visual-arts experiments are not present - they are a part of the history of Soviet architecture up till the end of the 20s, narrated by Guido Canella, that comprises the first section of this issue. But they are done away with relatively quickly, and Canella seems more interested in going into, not only the tendencies of Russian architecture in the couple of decades before the war, but above all the social, economical, and political conditions of post-revolutionary Russia. This may seem banal today, but this approach simply does not exist anywhere else before Kopp’s *Ville et Révolution* of 67, and does not become generalized before the 80s.

More relevant even, though, than the specifics of Canella’s essay, is what follows it. Issue 262 of *Casabella-Continuità* is divided into three broad sections. The first is Canella’s essay. The second is a compendium of translations of key Soviet texts that are representative of the fundamental polemics in the Soviet architectural debate from the revolution to the early-60s present. The third is a monograph on Soviet Moscow. We will not here delve deep into the last section, which is a monumental collection of information on the development of the Soviet city, thus marking the Italian approach from its starting point as essentially a city-focused approach. For now it’s the collection of Soviet texts that interests us, since it follows the same format we would see in most early Anglo-American attempts at historicising this material, from Bowlt to Bann to Feb. 1970 *A.D.* First of all, its time-frame is exceptional. It is simultaneously reporting on the latest news from Soviet architecture – as was usual to do in Western journals at the time – and tracing a full history of it. This means the history is not here confined to “the 20s”, as would be usual throughout the 70s in both visual-arts and architecture. And indeed, it is not only not confined to “the 20s”, “the 20s” are a gaping hole in the story this selection of texts presents. To the political/visual-arts first nine texts, comprising Lenin and Trotsky on art and city and socialist society, artistic group manifestoes, and Mayakovsky poems of which the last dates

from 1924, follows a 1939 text on the Moscow 1933-35 plan, and then a slew of texts on "socialist-realism" from 1947 onwards, ending with the at the time still recent Khrushchovite reform and its evolution up till the third Congress of Architects of 1961 when "constructivism" starts being rehabilitated. Again, because this needs to be underlined – there is absolutely nothing between 1924 and 1939. Now, it would be easy to dismiss this as a result of the same kind of constraint Gray suffers from, mainly a relative lack of access to the material, since in effect what we have is a similar end of "avant-garde" artistic manifestations on the same historiographical line. But a mere browse through Canella's substantial introductory essay reveals how the Italian editors absolutely did not share Gray's mistaken conviction that architectural "constructivism" barely had any manifestations. Canella spends most of his essay on these manifestations, which are richly illustrated. And in this, he mostly follows the same system of lines Kopp does. But three pages of the essay, and curiously the first three pages, are devoted to framing the period of "the avant-garde" from the point of view of what could be called its "objective" historical role, understood as the development of economic planning, mostly after the 30s. And in this framework, Canella is much less sensitive to the "avant-garde" bias of Kopp, presenting the evolution of the architectural debate as consequence of whatever are the planning priorities of the time – specifically in relation to the focus on housing – with the first two plans directing a huge proportion of the surplus towards further investment into heavy industry, and the third plan of 38-42, which would have been the one reprioritising consumer goods – housing among them – being forcibly delayed to the post 46 period. In this way this narrative not only de-ideologises the rise of "Stalinism" and the fall of "the avant-garde", it de-ideologises the Khrushchovite turn as well. And "the avant-garde" then ends perceived as a heroic but utopian period of experimentation of principles which real application is tempered by the practicalities of history.

These practicalities are determinant too in the "origin story" of "the avant-garde", one that here appears through the selection of writings. Despite the significant presence of visual-arts "avant-garde" texts – and notable lack of post-23 architectural ones – Lenin and Trotsky there define the problem as a political one. Furthermore, if the selection of Lenin and Trotsky is vague enough and would function perfectly well within Kopp, the post-39 selections place the political issues of the architectural debate in a fundamentally different basis. From Lenin, we have just a generic short passage on the need for increased production through democratic

planning and another on the dissolution of the city-countryside distinction,¹⁷⁷ and from Trotsky a fragment of *Literature and Revolution* that addresses architecture and reads like something Ginsburg could have written, bypassing Trotsky's explicit critique of excessive volunteerism on the production of socialist "culture" by intellectuals.¹⁷⁸ But after the "avant-garde" gap, this issue gifts the reader with an ample choice of polemic texts that fully express the nature of the debate all the way to the Khrushchovite mid-50s ideological reform and the eve of the mid-60s final rehabilitation of "constructivism", which the Italians were able to detect even two years in advance of its actual victory. The full consequences of this broader political reading are deep and unsettling for the "avant-garde" narrative, but that lies beyond the "origin stories" being here addressed. What for now must be noted is the politics-oriented reading in and of itself, one that Kopp, the other (and more widely divulged) side of the continental narrative shares.

Kopp, in his first book, could hardly be more aggressive in framing his historiographical reading of the Soviet architectural "avant-garde" as a social-political development. He opens his review of the period with a chapter titled "the necessary conditions". This is the third chapter. The first is a general introduction, the second a brief account of the pre-revolutionary situation. This pre-revolutionary situation is, for Kopp, not the innovations in the arts, but the development of industry, and the new programmes and technologies that come with it. New forms come not as artistic rebellion, innovations in the pure camp of ideas, but as consequences of transformations in what Marxist political-economic science calls the infrastructure of society. These infrastructural developments become broadly superstructural with the Great War and the Revolution, when politics becomes just as, or more important than economic changes alone. Kopp spends the third chapter, before he has yet spent any time describing the architecture of "the 20s" this book is dedicated to, identifying mainly three structural points that the revolution raises. The first is simple urban modernisation, not necessarily distinct from what could be identified in cities in bourgeois societies. The second is the much more specifically revolutionary abolition of private property of urban land, which opens the possibility of much more radical notions of urban planning. The third is Kopp's favourite – the revolutionary

¹⁷⁷ It should be noted that even in this very short passage the way Lenin frames the dissolution of this city-countryside distinction is quite a bit more organic than what the OSA-born "disurbanists" Kopp favours can appreciate. This must however be addressed in the next chapter.

¹⁷⁸ This critique happens in the same 1924 book, and also in his earlier 1923 writings on the subject, some of which were compiled in the later book.

reconstruction of the “way of life”. It is on the political possibilities opened by the second point, and the third point as the ultimate goal, that Kopp explains the struggles and debates of Soviet architecture of “the 20s”. We will not here spend time on what this entails for Kopp’s understanding of revolutionary socialist politics, and how it conditions his reading of architectural affairs. His culturalist interpretation, and the class conditions of this fundamental, if unconscious, disagreement with Lenin’s definition of socialism as “Soviets and electrification”, will, again, be explored in the next chapter. Here, again, all we need to register is how completely distinct the “origin story” is for “the avant-garde” in Kopp in comparison to the Anglo-American narratives, and how we should have as a result a certain political-historiographical scepticism of the Anglos own empirically motivated scepticism of the continental grand narratives.

None of this means Kopp dismisses developments in the arts. But he limits the relevant ones to mostly post-revolutionary phenomena, and the most architecturally proximate ones at that. He furthermore understands them as the search for a “formal expression” of the new ideological condition. Political and ideological problems drive “the 20s” discourse and practical experimentation for Kopp, in a manner that is fundamentally distinct from the way Gray or Bann address even the few bits of architecture that they do. In this difference we can see exactly an example of the generalisation Tafuri produces on how “the avant-garde’s” ideology of art-unto-life tends inevitably towards architecture. Where the Anglo-American 1970s visual-arts focused, art-historical view of the matter is still anchored on new expressions, and relates to politics at best as politically driven propaganda art (which is already a qualitative jump from mere symbolic expressions of new ideological constructs), Kopp’s architectural historiography explains precisely how this level of concerns would, during the course of “the 20s”, morph into much more operative discussions on the material organisation of social life, achieved through architectural operations. The theorisation of these operations would then constitute the achievement of OSA’s “constructivism”, as the ultimate form of revolutionary consciousness in the discipline. For Kopp and his “constructivists”, Architecture would actually design the new social relations in the emerging classless society, whereas the arts could only describe them. As such, “the avant-garde” truly gains an architectural specificity. Architecture takes ownership of “the avant-garde”. As has been indicated before, and as we will see next, architecture, at the same time, would, in its own mind, take ownership of the revolution as well.

4 – Drawing Lines II: Internal Divisions

“The Avant-garde” v Politics

The cultural revolution: why “constructivism” is objectively Trotskyite

When last we looked at the problem of internal divisions within “the avant-garde”, it was Stephen Bann we saw pointing out in 1974 how Anatole Kopp gave significant emphasis to the distinction between “formalists” and “constructivists”. We have also frequently addressed how differences between distinct groupings tend to be blurred, even at the very start of the thesis when we looked at the Hadid-Schumacher popular-culture understanding of “the avant-garde”, but also how the historiographical category of “the avant-garde” itself, in the way it historically emerges in post-60s West academia, is fundamentally based on finding common ground between groups that at the time were often bitterly opposed and didn’t self-identify as “avant-garde” or with any equivalent umbrella term. Early “constructivism”, UNOVIS “suprematism”, Inkhuk “productivism”, LEF “leftism”, ASNOVA “formalism”/“rationalism”, OSA “constructivism” – these distinctions are important, and the way they are dealt with is often representative of the ideological conditioning of historians, and we have up till now spent Part II mostly dealing with examples of these dealings. These internal lines within “the avant-garde” however, all function conventionally as part of the established historiographical narrative. Addressing them can only take us so far, precisely because their existence can be and is acknowledged by the narrative, accepting “the avant-garde” exactly as it is historiographically – and theoretically – understood, as a given. It is only when the historiography frames the debates among the “historical avant-garde” as approaching their terminus that suddenly the ideological condition of “the avant-garde” can be fully revealed in its historical and historiographical terms. This point, when the historiographical narrative decides that internal lines give way to the line between “the avant-garde” and what comes next, must be read in this critique as the ultimate point of crisis. There, when the Western post-60s historiography perceives the unravelling of the “historical avant-garde”, the ideological limits of its understanding too must unravel, and show its full complicity with the “avant-garde” voluntarist paternalism it is trying to both protect and make its own.

The most operative historiographical agent through which to start looking at how this turn is managed remains the foundational ideologue-historian of Soviet architecture, Anatole Kopp. Kopp’s work begins publishing in 67, with *Ville et Revolution*. This is his account of what he calls “the 20s” and ends with the Stalinist smashing of “the avant-garde”. It doesn’t go into too much detail on the mechanisms of this smashing. Luckily for us, his last book on the subject

focuses precisely on this issue. Published in 1978, *L'Architecture de la Période Stalinienne* may be the foundational account of “Stalinist” architecture as such, and it condenses within itself a series of contradictions that are both interesting and symptomatic. Kopp describes the architecture of this period as a linear continuation of pre-revolutionary architecture. Indeed, his chapter on the origins of “Stalinist” architecture is essentially an account of the rise of classicism in Russia as the expression of an increasingly centralized Tsarist political power, accompanied by a historical process of modernization and westernization. This long trend would then find its final expression in three particular currents, represented by three particular architects – Ivan Zholtovskii, representing a Palladian renaissance tradition, Ivan Fomin, representing a late neo-classicism, and Alexander Tamanian, representing regionalist traditionalism. The blend of these currents would become the mature architectural style of the “Stalinist” period, “socialist realism” in architecture.

The bulk of this book, however, is not on how this linear progression came to evolve and establish itself, but instead on how it dealt with that which is perceived as an interruption in its continuity - the period of “the 20s”, defined as in-between 1917 and 1931-32. On the first page of the second chapter, immediately after the introduction, Kopp states that:

*“It is possible to approach the architecture of the Stalinist period without recalling the essential characteristics of the period preceding it, that of the 20s”.*¹⁷⁹

He adds, however, that:

*“the architecture of the Stalinist period cannot be understood but through the contradiction lying between it and the architecture of the 20s, (...) the achievements of the 30s to 55 are, on all domains, the opposite of what was imagined (and sometimes built) before [...] at the level of architectural forms [...] of theory [...] above all of the social content of architecture”*¹⁸⁰

And so this book is essentially an attempt to understand “socialist realism” in architecture through this fundamental contradiction between it and the period of “the 20s”, even though it could, hypothetically, be understood without it, as the simple continuation of the long process of neo-classicism, political centralization and economic modernization.

¹⁷⁹ Anatole KOPP, *L'Architecture de la Période Stalinienne*, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, Grenoble, 1978, p.31

¹⁸⁰ Anatole KOPP, *L'Architecture de la Période Stalinienne*, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, Grenoble, 1978, p.31

Kopp produces his explanation, in a textbook vulgar application of Marxist principles, by attempting to understand the classes in conflict in the period and attributing to each of them a given architectural trend. In his second chapter, he produces a short account of the period of “the 20s”, in order to put the rest of the book in the proper perspective. This chapter is not, however, a condensed version of his earlier book on this period, but instead chooses to focus mainly on social issues, intermingling what is called the “cultural revolution”, that defines the period as well as the chapter title, with the architecture produced by the early vanguards. So this initial period of the revolution would have meant, for the masses:

“alphabetization, propaganda, itinerant cinema, spontaneous creation of clubs and houses of culture, open air theatre, etc.”¹⁸¹

while the intellectuals of the cultural avant-garde:

“who the bourgeoisie had treated, only yesterday, with contempt or irony, found their hour at last.”¹⁸²

So an alliance would have been established between the working masses and “the avant-garde”, in the search for a new way of life that would develop during the NEP years, and architecture would provide the crucial means, both material and ideological, for this new culture to grow, following the concept of the “social condenser” invented by Moisei Ginzburg, who Kopp quotes extensively. And Kopp explains how “avant-garde” architects, and especially his favourites, the “constructivists” of the group OSA, developed an architecture that was designed to radically transform social relationships, and in particular family relationships, through the new model of communal housing, that would socialise all domestic chores and liberate women. Following an extensive quotation from Trotsky's *The Revolution Betrayed*, in which Kopp underlines the passage stating that:

¹⁸¹ Anatole KOPP, *L'Architecture de la Période Stalinienne*, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, Grenoble, 1978, p.33

¹⁸² Anatole KOPP, *L'Architecture de la Période Stalinienne*, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, Grenoble, 1978, p.33

And indeed they may well have thought that. See Pamela Kachurin on how the Suprematists used the revolutionary state apparatus in the favour of both their art and their wallets:

Pamela KACHURIN, *Making Modernism Soviet: The Russian Avant-Garde in the Early Soviet Era, 1918-1928*, Northwestern University Press, Chicago, 2013

*"the successive changes to the status of the family in the USSR are the best characterization for the true nature of the Soviet society and the evolution of its ruling strata"*¹⁸³

Kopp links the communal housing to the social progresses attained in the 20s, especially focusing on those connected to women such as the legalisation of divorce and abortion, equal pay across genders, etc., going so far as advocating that with the cultural revolution true love would finally become possible, a love devoid of material needs and existing as pure emotional attachment.¹⁸⁴

The abandonment of the architecture of "the avant-garde" and the return to the classicist models is then linked to the opposite social phenomenon, and the ascension of a new class, that of a new centralised bureaucratic apparatus of state. This class, supported by a new stratum of intellectuals, would favour old models of dwelling so far as they were capable of solving the specific problems of this minority, albeit at the cost of the delayed solution for the majority. This would come with the increase in hierarchisation of salaries, the steps back concerning the above mentioned social legislation, etc.:

*"This change of attitude [...] concerning the problems of the family are not limited to this domain. They touch in fact all the domains that had been those of the "reconstruction of the way of life". The causes of this change must be found on the very nature of the bureaucracy which number and importance would grow for the entire Stalinist period."*¹⁸⁵

The conflicts between different positions and groups in architecture are then mechanically explained by this underlying conflict in society. The groups of "the avant-garde", especially OSA, represented the true revolutionary aims of October, supported, albeit in a complex manner, by the people. Kopp doesn't want to pretend that the whole of the population of the

¹⁸³ Anatole KOPP, *L'Architecture de la Période Stalinienne*, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, Grenoble, 1978, p.39

¹⁸⁴ A thoroughly un-Marxist idea, that a social relation such as love can be without a material foundation. Also curious that this is the very predication on which Stefan Heym's novel is based for Julia and Wollin's relationship to grow.

Anatole KOPP, *L'Architecture de la Période Stalinienne*, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, Grenoble, 1978, p.43

¹⁸⁵ Anatole KOPP, *L'Architecture de la Période Stalinienne*, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, Grenoble, 1978, p.52

country would happily jump to communal housing solutions built in a “modernist” style. But while:

*"we have shown in other essays that a certain collectivisation of the way of life was considered by the workers (and particularly by working women) a solution to the inextricable material situation in which they found themselves."*¹⁸⁶

*"The cadre, the administrator, the director, is henceforth a character belonging to a social category detached from the concerns and of the everyday life of the simple workers. [...] his apartment is more agreeable and more intimate than the projected communal houses. By imitating, consciously or not, the way of life of the rulers of the old regime, he can support his material and cultural needs, individually and immediately."*¹⁸⁷

This new class of administrative cadres, a new state bourgeoisie which takeover of the Soviet Union is the political foundation of the “Stalinist” period (following Trotsky's argument to the letter), would be represented by a new group, VOPRA, that begins as an attack on the constructivist positions and that will, allied with the classicists and traditionalists, ascend to become dominant.

Kopp complains of how Nikolai Miliutin would, in his article *The important objectives at the current phase of Soviet architecture* in the journal *Soviet Architecture* in 1932, simplistically associate each architectural current with each class, marrying the constructivists with the Trotskyites. Kopp spends the entire book doing the exact same thing.¹⁸⁸ He also shows remarkable lack of confidence in the very working masses he believed appreciated, to an extent, the efforts of collectivisation when, facing Miliutin's appeal for the:

*"(...) integration of the working masses in the debates over the most important architectural projects"*¹⁸⁹

He remarks:

¹⁸⁶ Anatole KOPP, *L'Architecture de la Période Stalinienne*, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, Grenoble, 1978, p.60

¹⁸⁷ Anatole KOPP, *L'Architecture de la Période Stalinienne*, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, Grenoble, 1978, p.59

¹⁸⁸ Kopp's systematic leaning on Trotsky's account of the Stalinist turn while glorifying OSA does not help his stance that constructivists aren't Trotskyites either.

¹⁸⁹ Anatole KOPP, *L'Architecture de la Période Stalinienne*, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, Grenoble, 1978, p.115

*"(...) to what can such debates lead to but a refuse of all research, of all innovation and to a return to the forms of the past [...] in the spirit of the masses of a culturally underdeveloped country like the USSR was, architecture cannot be identified as anything but the historical monuments or the «oussadba», the dwelling in Russian empire style of the landowner or province noble."*¹⁹⁰

And he follows taking offense at the VOPRA demagogues who:

*"try to demonstrate that the «modernists», despite their statements are in fact detached from all political concerns, that their constant references to a «reconstruction of the way of life» are nothing but camouflage for their abstract formal games"*¹⁹¹

And he immediately replies by basically throwing the accusation back, accusing them of being those for whom:

*"the critique of modernism, through a leftist phraseology, is essentially nothing but a manoeuvre destined to occupy positions held by partisans of modernism"*¹⁹²

This set of contradictions inherent to Kopp's discourse may be necessary for two reasons. First, and contrary to his volume on the 20s, he does not actually present a history of “socialist realist” architecture, by looking at the specific production of this period (apart from a few facades), but only of the discussions and politics of the transition. The second half of the book describes the theoretical justifications of the “socialist realist” ideologues, and then goes on to describe in broad strokes the architectural *milieu* that was established in the 30s, but little architecture. His most interesting observations concerning actual projects are those on the city, and that is precisely the plane in which he must concede that the “Stalinist” period witnessed a professionalization of the practice of urbanism, and the quality of “Stalinist” urban engineers was far removed from the amateurism of the early “avant-garde”, even if it lacked the visionary impulse or, as far as he is concerned, the revolutionary character.

¹⁹⁰ Anatole KOPP, *L'Architecture de la Période Stalinienne*, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, Grenoble, 1978, p.116

¹⁹¹ Anatole KOPP, *L'Architecture de la Période Stalinienne*, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, Grenoble, 1978, p.68

¹⁹² Anatole KOPP, *L'Architecture de la Période Stalinienne*, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, Grenoble, 1978, p.68

Second, Kopp does not seem to realise that what he is in essence proposing is that the “Stalinist” dictatorship established itself to prevent the revolution of the way of life, which in the terms he describes it is nothing but a mass forced collectivisation and industrialization of domestic life. In his view, the Central Committee decision of May 29 1930 regarding the new way of life can have no other explanation than an attempt by the new class of state bourgeois bureaucrats to put a stop to the path of the revolution, which “the avant-garde” and especially the “constructivists” embodied so well. The quoted text of the resolution states that:

*"Projects [...] for the transformation of existing cities or for the construction of new ones [...] and that foresee the immediate realisation or transformation into public services of all that constitutes the way of life of workers: feeding, dwelling, educating children by separating them from their parents, suppression of family habits and ways of life, authoritarian interdiction of family meals, etc. The putting in practice of these harmful and utopian conceptions that do not account for the material resources of the country, neither for the preparedness of the population, would lead to extraordinary expenses and to the discredit of the very idea of a socialist transformation of the way of life."*¹⁹³

With the problems that faced the forced mass collectivisation of agriculture and the accelerated mass industrialization in the first couple of five-year plans, one might be tempted to see the dictatorship of “Stalinism” as a moderate, lesser evil meant to prevent a much harsher, no-stone-left-untuned style “avant-garde” dictatorship of “constructivist” “Trotskyite” “modernism”.

This narrative of Kopp is important, not only because it is foundational, but because it is simultaneously an object of later suspicion, as we have seen, among Anglo-American circles, while at the same time being unopposed by any of the later histories in any fundamental way. While it is to be expected pretty much anywhere one looks at a more empirically minded historical analysis of the realities of early Soviet architecture to find a disclaimer critique of Kopp, this always turns out to be quite performative in the scope of the narrative – yes, Kopp is too simplistic and overly engaged with the “constructivists”, but no, other, later, more thorough historians have no serious alternative to offer to the structure of the macro-historical narrative he

¹⁹³ Anatole KOPP, *L'Architecture de la Période Stalinienne*, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, Grenoble, 1978, p.91

proposes.¹⁹⁴ Despite the digging of more data and the enormous accumulation of new material the field has observed since its inception, this quantitative enrichment and complexification simply refuses to turn itself into qualitative reorganisation of the interpretative framework. The Western perception of “the avant-garde” remains incapable of achieving anything resembling an epistemological break in this field, even while it routinely washes its hands of the framework it inevitably ends up adding to. As was metaphorised about Jean-Louis Cohen much earlier on in this thesis, it is as if later histories inject mortar between the bricks of a pre-existing historiographical edifice – even while they repeat how they dislike the look of it. Let us now take a look at a particularly good example of this problem.

The actual revolution: the “really existing plan”

The past few years have seen a particularly important contribution to a more thorough history of the first couple of decades of the Soviet city. The tradition of a revisionist Anglo-American social history of the Soviet Union “from below”, by what Sheila Fitzpatrick called a “new cohort” of historians in the late 80s,¹⁹⁵ has recently encroached upon almost-directly architectural issues by way of a series of sociological/anthropological studies on specific industrial new-town case-studies. The three-decade time lag may seem striking, but it is not too dissimilar from the lag between the post-50s first body of historiography on “Stalinism” and the late 80s-early 90s historiography of “Stalinist” architecture, generally following the post-50s “totalitarian model”. If the historical coincidence that architectural historians were around the time of the dissolution of the Soviet Union displaying great interest in performing in architecture what at the same time social historians were expressly attacking seems even more striking, one should probably simply take it as reminder that art and even more so architecture tend to be more self-motivated by whatever serves their own interests in the present than in

¹⁹⁴ For a particularly clear reading of Kopp’s motivations, dissociating it from the later, especially Anglo-centred, works, and made essentially through a critique of it as “operative criticism” in the Tafurian sense, see:

Olga YAKUSHENKO, “Anatole Kopp’s Town and Revolution as history and a manifesto: a reactualisation of Russian Constructivism in the West in the 1960s”, in *Journal of Art Historiography*, Nr.14 (Jun. 2016), from: <<https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/yakushenko.pdf>>, consulted in 23/09/2017

¹⁹⁵ In significant measure inspired by her own work that had started earlier. See the particularly valuable debate on the emergence of this social-historical approach in *The Russian Review*, Vol.45 Nr.4 (Oct. 1986), with articles by Sheila Fitzpatrick, Stephen F. Cohen, Geof Elley, Alfred G. Meyer and Peter Kenez.

contemporary broader socio-political implications. So during the McCarthyite period and the decade after, architectural and art historians were either ignoring anything beyond the wall or developing the first curiosity about “the 20s” out of pure disciplinary admiration, and had no reason at all to look at architecture of the 30s to 50s as means for a deeper knowledge of building-and-politics relationships.

The influence of this social history of the Soviet past manifested itself in two ways. It had a direct expression within architectural history proper, mainly in the 1990s, which “return to the empirical” greatly defined what this thesis calls the second phase of the Western historiography of Soviet architecture; and it reached, through its own internal expansion, a point where it produces what should be taken as serious, unaddressed, and probably unaddressable implications for architectural history, architecture wanting to keep its “project” intact. The architectural-history-side of this happened, as said before, mainly in the UK, led by Catherine Cooke, and as much as it would inject a previously unseen level of historical rigour into the existing grand-narrative, it would at the same time come to determine the solidification of the category of “the avant-garde” in all its ideological splendour. This seeming paradox will be tackled last. What we will now address is the consequences of social history itself done by historians, in its interactions with the architectural history done by architectural historians it inevitably needs to consider while researching architectural matters, and the symptomatic contradictions one can productively identify as a result.

While case-studies on Soviet cities are not at all a new feature of post-2000s research – Steven Kotkin’s 1997 *Magnetic Mountain* on Magnitogorsk being a crucial example – the cadence at which such researches were published, and the proximity to architectural concerns they at times reached, make this recent period noteworthy. Paul Stronsky’s 2010 *Tashkent: Forging a Soviet City 1930-1966*; Lennart Sammuelsen’s 2011 *Tankograd: The Formation of a Soviet Company Town, Chelyabinsk 1900s-1950s*; Heather D. Dehaan’s 2013 *Stalinist City Planning: Professionals, Performance and Power*; in these three books the social mechanisms of planning and implementing the plan take centre stage, reaching the scale of architectural concerns in ways that necessarily complexify the generalised understanding of the architectural debates of the time. That the authors are not architects or architectural historians, however, makes such consequences of the work more or less unaddressed. And indeed, it makes for a particularly poignant example of how a given historiographical grand narrative cannot be contradicted by simply throwing facts at it.

The most interesting, because symptomatic, example of this can be found in the most recent of the mentioned volumes, Dehaan’s *Stalinist City Planning*, a book on the history of urban planning in Nizhnii Novgorod, later Gorkii, that dedicates chapter two to covering the

formation of the new factory town of Avtozavod nearby.¹⁹⁶ In this chapter, the author shortly describes the public competition for the architectural project in 1930, as well as the complications in its implementation in the following two years. Dehaan explains how participation in the competition came from five different sources:

“The students who participated in Avtostroi’s competition represented all the major schools of Soviet design, including the Union of Contemporary Architects (OSA), which was the theoretical home of constructivism, as well as the Association of Architects-Urbanists (ARU), and the Higher State Art and Technical Institute (Vkhutein), both of which sent students of a more “rationalist” bent. The more traditionalist Moscow Architectural Society (MAO) entered, as did students from the Moscow Higher Technical Institute (MVTU), a bastion of constructivist teaching. Participants from this final school, however, hailed from the All-Union Association of Proletarian Architects (VOPRA), an up-and-coming group of provincial and younger architects who challenged the authority of the avant-garde, even their own constructivist teachers.”¹⁹⁷

This excerpt is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, it makes a somewhat awkward identification of institutions from whence the student proposals came, because it lists “schools” of different kinds. While the Vkhutein and the MVTU were state schools with official architecture courses, OSA, ARU (the Ladovskii-led splinter group of ASNOVA), and VOPRA were more informal architectural groups. MAO, in turn, was the pre-revolutionary official association of architects of Moscow. There was significant overlap between these three kinds of structures – the veteran OSA and ARU architects were often members of MAO (when they hailed from Moscow), and they taught at Vkhutein and MVTU. VOPRA members tended to be students of Vkhutein and the MVTU, as did the younger members of OSA, ASNOVA, ARU, and young muscovite architectural students would be also members of MAO. It is extremely likely that the students the text identifies as coming from OSA, ARU and MAO were also students in one of these two state schools, in the same way the text identifies the VOPRA

¹⁹⁶ This automobile factory complex, a large enterprise for which the American firm Austin was contracted by the Soviet state to contribute technology and expertise, had in turn been the focus of the earlier Richard Cartwright Austin’s 2004 *Building Utopia: Erecting Russia’s First Modern City, 1930*, a noteworthy book by the son of Allan Austin, an Austin engineer who was in turn son of the company’s president at the time, giving a close account of the process using letters and personal impressions.

¹⁹⁷ Heather D. DEHAAN, *Stalinist City Planning: Professionals, Performance, and Power*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, Buffalo and London, 2013, p.46

Students as coming from the MVTU. Regardless, the situation of the architectural debate in 1930 was fluid enough that it was common that students that were members of one of the militant architecture groups might identify their submissions for the competition with the group and not the official state school they actually studied at, as it was natural that official invitations for the competition would be extended to these groups in the same way they were directed to the schools themselves.

Secondly, the way the excerpt divides the different five origins of the student proposals in its sentence structure is suggestive. It identifies OSA, ARU and the Vkhutein equally “rationalist” students in the first sentence, and the traditionalist-dominated MAO and VOPRA’s MVTU students in the second sentence. This suggests a reading of the historical role of each of these groups that follows the conventional Kopp-like division into “avant-garde” and reaction.¹⁹⁸ This, however, might be excessive literary nitpicking, even for the standards of this thesis.

What is not excessive literary nitpicking is how this same layout is repeated over the following few pages, where the author describes in more detail the different submissions. Three paragraphs are dedicated to OSA, Vkhutein and ARU participation in sequence, describing their specific choices for the competition in the context of a brief appreciation of the central tenets of their “schools”. OSA students would have followed Nikolai Miliutin’s model of the linear city, and foresee two phases of construction that would gradually move towards collective living via an intermediate transitional model (the transitional model seemed to follow Ginzburg and Milinis’ example of the Narkomfin apartment block, though this reference is not given by Dehaan). The Vkhutein students, who are systematically called “rationalists”, probably were associated to the remains of ASNOVA after Ladovskii had left to found ARU,¹⁹⁹ and were

¹⁹⁸ This reading has, it must be recognised, in 1930 a certain level of empirical truth, since, as was mentioned before, in that year OSA would successfully incorporate itself, ASNOVA and ARU into VANO, the Scientific All-Union Association of Architecture, unifying the vanguardist anti-traditionalist schools, with the exception of VOPRA that chose to stay independent.

¹⁹⁹ Given that the author provides Khan-Magomedov as her reference, and Khan-Magomedov uses the term “rationalist” for ASNOVA. The term “rationalist” – probably coming from Soviet historians like Khan-Magomedov who were in the 70s re-habilitating early Soviet architecture in the Soviet Union, where the term “formalism” was an outright insult – would become mainstream in English language literature to categorise this group, as opposed to French and Italian literature – where the term “formalist” is favoured ever since the Kopp and De Feo inception. Dehaan references Kopp as well – though never any Italians, unsurprisingly – so it’s hard to be absolutely sure of

mostly concerned with formal diversity, associated to the psychologist formal and colour studies that defined ASNOVA's approach.²⁰⁰ The ARU group is presented as focusing on diverse scales of communal living. These three paragraphs are followed by another on the problems identified with these three submissions, and only then the two paragraphs for MAO and the VOPRA-MVTU submissions come, introduced through an unfavourable comparison with the three "avant-garde" groups:

*"(...) these constructivist and rationalist designs offered a level of creativity unmatched by the remaining two teams."*²⁰¹

MAO's members would have been students of Zholtovskii in the Vkhutein, and their entry was composed of "old-style city quarters" and individual family apartments. The VOPRA-MVTU students presented a proposal following all the trappings of "the avant-garde" of the time, with independent collective housing units laid out interspersed with a network of collective functions, albeit less formally sophisticated and therefore, probably less expensive. Dehaan mentions in addition how it had "superior regional planning", especially as far as territorial layout and circulation was concerned, indicating the probable influence of the constructivist-aligned Alexander Platonovich Ivanitskii, teacher at the MVTU and the planner in charge of historical Nizhnii-Novgorod itself, and the "hero-figure" of her book.

The VOPRA submission won the competition, while being a perfectly admissible representation of "avant-garde" doctrines, but a bit more "down-to-earth". It followed the constructivist collectivist model, but had no high formal ambitions, consisting of a series of

what she means, and we must endure a certain level of terminological imprecision. This is particularly the case since she is not an architectural historian, and not overly concerned with these historiographical distinctions, and we cannot seriously expect her work to take notice of contradictions in terminology between different architectural histories, especially when architectural historians themselves tend to gloss over them and their deeper implications. This is a general concern in reading other authors of studies in social history as well.

²⁰⁰ The author mentions that such colour-formal studies were taught to the students at the Vkhutein by a "rationalist" teacher. The teacher who introduced this programme was Ladovskii, who in 1930 had already left the "rationalist" group ASNOVA to form, precisely, ARU, which adds another level of imprecision to the description. It's possible she also means one of his successors in ASNOVA who taught at the Vkhutein along similar lines, Vladimir Krinskii or Viktor Balikhin. Again, this must be excused given that this is not an architectural historical text, but a social history that relies on established architectural histories to deal with this architectural competition.

²⁰¹ Heather D. DEHAAN, *Stalinist City Planning: Professionals, Performance, and Power*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, Buffalo and London, 2013, p.49

boxy blocks with windows. It followed a Ladovskii-type urban layout, but with less variation and privileging connections to the existing city along which the old and new centres might in the future be joined – as they indeed were. Dehaan mentions how Ivanitskii called this proposal “dynamic”, despite it carrying none of the formal dynamism of typical OSA/ASNOVA designs, on the basis of its urban-territorial functional concerns – it was not simply a static model for an ideal socialist town, but an intervention that facilitated immediate construction, while taking into account possible later developments at an urban and regional scale. Dynamism of this functional kind could be seen elsewhere only in OSA’s proposal, in the way it phased the collectivisation of domestic life. Since the goal of such collectivisation was in the process of being itself phased out of Soviet housing policy, this turned out to be a functional dynamism of a more utopian character.

In fact, Dehaan’s description of the evolution and implementation of the plan is an incredibly useful contribution to how architectural history perceives “the avant-garde” and its downfall. As the VOPRA plan was taken as the base on which Austin made its own technical versions, “avant-garde” elements espoused by VOPRA were systematically challenged “from below” – not “from above” – and by the material constraints of the incredible speed of construction. VOPRA won the competition because its proposal was by far the most practical. Critiques from the local council of Nizhnii-Novgorod attacked the collective housing model on several practical issues that were perceived as detrimental to the workers. The housing blocks were subsequently adapted to the transitional model of OSA’s proposal, and then two thirds of the blocks became traditional family apartments. Dehaan narrates how by the time the Austin company left in December 1931, the twelve first-stage housing combines (each with five buildings for 1000 people) comprised only five collective units with all the collective *accoutrements* and all the “modernist” appearance, and seven simplified to family apartments built of wood with pitched roofs. The labour needs to prepare the grounds and build the first units required a large extension of provisional hut dwellings and a temporary network of electricity and sanitation that, given the inevitable delays in construction – since the priority was the construction of the factory itself and the housing tended to take second place, associated with shortages of skilled labour and materials – ended up becoming permanent and interfering with the planned layout. Due to lack of temporary housing for construction workers, the first buildings were occupied before they were finished, and while these buildings were the ones that

still followed the collective model, the usage the workers made of it tended to be improvised along the traditional social structures they were used to, which was the traditional family unit the buildings were deliberately designed not to accommodate.²⁰² In other words, Dehaan shows how the VOPRA proposal, in the sequence of historical events, proved superior to those of the groups the established historiographical narrative has defined as being “the avant-garde” in the measure it was less “avant-garde” than them, and ended up failing precisely in the measure that it still was just as “avant-garde” as them. She shows also how this failure was not an imposition “from above” to quash a true workers democracy, but an effect of the interactions “from below” and of the internal contradictions of the process of accelerated industrialisation. Or yet again in other words, the proposal of “the avant-garde” collapsed in as much as it historically contradicted Lenin’s very definition of socialism, “soviets plus electrification”.

Dehaan’s description of the events in Avtozavod between 1930 and 1932 serves then as an empiric example, in the very material field of architecture and urban planning, of the broad political critique Tafuri aims at “the avant-garde” in general. The author realises the implications of her work, and directly addresses them by identifying a “*subtle arrogance*” of the “avant-garde” architects, who imposed their ideal of collective living on industrial workers and not on themselves,²⁰³ and at a broader level, how their models:

“(…) represented professional’s claim to stand as agents of a higher scientific or aesthetic truth that might be applied to the reorganisation and improvement of human society. The elitist, theoretical outlook that inspired the avant-garde ultimately challenged the authority of the Party, which did not govern primarily through technological systems, but through the direct conquest of hearts and minds. In banning housing combines, the Party denied to the avant-garde the technocratic privilege of fashioning society in the expert’s own image. Rejecting such authority,

²⁰² It should in addition be noted that the vast majority of these new industrial workers were previously quite poor peasants who had never had access to electricity or sewage, or much living space, and in addition who probably had seen their livelihoods destroyed over the period of the Great War and the subsequent Civil War. The general poorness of living conditions in Avtozavod was therefore not contradictory to a generalised popular support for the enterprise, propagandised and perceived as the reconstruction of the country in the direction of modernisation. It was the more skilled workers with more urban backgrounds who tended to leave the site for better opportunities in more established urban centres, and since employment was assured, they had no reason not to move.

Dehaan makes short mention of this later phenomenon, and Cartwright Austin addresses the former one. Kotkin tells a similar story about Magnitogorsk as well.

²⁰³ Heather D. DEHAAN, *Stalinist City Planning: Professionals, Performance, and Power*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, Buffalo and London, 2013, p.60

the Party directly subjugated designers to the watchful oversight of both people and the Party apparatus.”²⁰⁴

This is a statement that could have been made by the 1971 Tafuri we looked at in Part I, or by this thesis itself. The author even ends up using the same “ivory tower” analogy this thesis used in Part II in respect, not to the “historical avant-garde” Tafuri critiqued, but to the post-60s West academia of which Tafuri was an ideological vanguard. The author does this precisely in the same way, explaining how professionals and intellectuals flew from the contradictions they were facing and not really understanding, and:

“(…) sought refuge in the ivory tower of scientific objectivity. Rather than use research to guide professional action, they used research – or rather, endless calls for more of it – to forestall concrete action of any sort. Unfortunately, such attempts at self-preservation did nothing to enhance scientific authority. If anything (...), this political game invited the state directly into the ivory tower to arbitrate scientific disputes and drive architects out of this tower and into the world below.”²⁰⁵

Even the Soviet “avant-garde” retreated to academia in the 30s, taking their “project” with them away from practice and into research, when faced with its failure. The author, whose work is much more that of an empiric researcher in the field of social history than that of a broad critic of ideology, tends to refer to Boris Groys as a reference for judgements such as this.²⁰⁶ And yet, at the same time, the author feels the need to still pay respects to the “totalitarian model” attacked by the American revisionist historians of the Soviet Union, in whose body of work this book clearly fits. This shows in several small moments, for example in indicating how overcrowding facilitated repressive political-police control.²⁰⁷ But it mostly

²⁰⁴ Heather D. DEHAAN, *Stalinist City Planning: Professionals, Performance, and Power*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, Buffalo and London, 2013, p.60

²⁰⁵ Heather D. DEHAAN, *Stalinist City Planning: Professionals, Performance, and Power*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, Buffalo and London, 2013, p.63

²⁰⁶ We could read Groys as a 15 years younger sort of Anglo-American arts-historiography version of what the Tafurian critique produces in architecture. See particularly:

Boris GROYS, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1992

²⁰⁷ Heather D. DEHAAN, *Stalinist City Planning: Professionals, Performance, and Power*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, Buffalo and London, 2013, p.55

shows when Dehaan tries to explain VOPRA's victory in the competition also on a political basis which interpretation stems directly and solely from the established architectural historiography she has consulted, and not at all from her own research. She dedicates two paragraphs tempering her description of VOPRA's work – showing it to be mostly in line with “avant-garde” thought, and failing “from below” precisely because of this – to the possibility that there was a level of political favouritism of this group over the “avant-garde” ones they attacked, despite she explicitly stating there is absolutely no empirical evidence of this. Had Dehaan a slightly finer knowledge of the history of the Soviet architectural debate, she would have been more aware that in 1930 VOPRA had only just begun to focus on the constructivists as their enemy, having inclusively co-signed with OSA, ASNOVA and ARU a denunciation of the classicist architecture of Zholtovskii and Fomin, who were the main enemies until the May 1930 formation of VANO and the rise of the leaders of OSA to an arguably dominant position in the architectural debate.²⁰⁸ It rests entirely outside the realm of historiographical possibilities that the hostility VOPRA directed at the older, petty-bourgeois in origin, and cosmopolitan “constructivists” from 1930 on might have been based on their own monopolisation over the notion of a socialist architecture, faced with suspicion by the younger, working class, provincial architects of the first generation trained in the Soviet state schools that massified and democratised access to higher education.²⁰⁹ It also rests unmentioned that the accusation of “formalism” the architects of VOPRA so vehemently directed at the “constructivists” from 1930 on came precisely as events such as those Dehaan narrates in Nizhnii-Novgorod were unfolding in industrial new towns all over the Soviet Union. It remains unaddressed how any later

²⁰⁸ This awareness is available from the same sources Dehaan used. But the dating of specific developments is hard to keep in mind when one is not fully conscious of the extreme speed of the evolution of the debate around 1930, a speed probably caused in great part precisely by the type of situation Dehaan describes in her book. A cursory knowledge of this history tends to remember a group that existed from 29 to 32, like Vopra, along the lines the macro-narrative imposes, failing to acknowledge that it too evolved in those three years, and its priorities and alignments switched. On the joint declaration by the “avant-garde” groups, see:

Selim O. KHAN-MAGOMEDOV, *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture: The Search for New Solutions in the 1920s and 1930s*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1987, p.237

²⁰⁹ Catherine Cooke broaches this issue quite soberly, in a way that has not really been managed by anyone else and that has yet to be properly absorbed by the grand-narrative (and that probably cannot). See:

Catherine COOKE, *Russian Avant-Garde: Theories of Art, Architecture and the City*, Academy Editions, London, 1995

favouritism the Party establishment displayed towards VOPRA over “the avant-garde” may very well come in the sequence of these developments, where “avant-garde” visions fail versus popular and material pressures, and comes possibly as a consequence of this failure and not as the cause of it. This sequence where Dehaan feels the need to placate the established historiographical narrative of “the avant-garde” in Soviet architecture, despite her work directly contradicting it, is compounded when she finishes her chapter on Avtozavod essentially replicating a Hugh-D.-Hudson or Anatole-Kopp-style, Trotsky-based denunciation of Stalinist reaction in articulation with the imposition of a return to traditional patriarchal family structures, as an operative obstacle to true workers democracy, and as an effective micro-scale metaphor for Stalin’s own totalitarian dictatorship – again, a narrative that her research directly contradicts, by exposing the extremely complicated nature of the implementation of planned industrial development in articulation with “avant-garde” visions, a process mainly defined by pressures “from below”.

The historiographical survival of “the project”

This should never be read as an indictment of the author. It is not necessarily the task of the on-the-ground researcher of social history to challenge historiographical meta-narratives, especially when they come from a field external to them like architecture. But the contradictions in the author’s text are a symptomatic “perfect storm” of the conditions in which they function. They show us two crucial things.

First, they show that historiographical meta-narratives cannot be challenged by mere facts. This requires broader historiographical critique, made at the same meta-historical level they function – despite the fact that these meta-historical narratives have not been themselves historically constructed at such a meta-level, but through the accumulation of ideological assumptions and implicit interpretative frameworks conditioning precisely most on-the-ground history research and writing since the inception of the field. This should not be surprising for a Marxist analysis. Ideology is (mostly) not a conspiracy, it is not a construction made at the same meta-level it effectively operates, and in such fields as architectural history, it imposes itself from outside, from politics, on the architectural historian. That we see in Dehaan that the challenge the social historian can make to the meta-narrative is itself attacked from outside as well, but now this outside is architectural history, serves as reminder of the complexity of the reproductive cycle of ideological frameworks, and an indictment of the theoretical frailty and the ideological pervasiveness of the cultural field.

Second, they show also that the structural ideological problem of “the avant-garde” is ongoing in the present. For the pervasiveness of the cultural field imposes itself on the revisionist social historian precisely in the safeguarding of the ideological role of “the avant-garde”, much more than it does on any moral critique of the politics of “Stalinism”. While the two have been traditionally associated, there isn’t a necessary co-relation. Understanding – via broad critiques such as Tafuri’s, and case-studies such as Dehaan’s – the collapse of “the avant-garde” as coming under the weight of its own historical contradictions, or better yet, the weight of the contradictions between its voluntarist “project” and actual history, is possible both for those with a dispassionate view of the politics of “Stalinism” as the fruit of the contradictions of really existing socialism (probably a minute number of people in the West today), and for those who’d rather maintain their moral critique of it on the grounds of “totalitarianism”. For the former, the collapse of “the avant-garde” is simply the historical trimming down of false ideological elements from the actualisation of “soviets plus electrification”. For the latter, it would cease to be the tragic totalitarian destruction of true revolutionary ideals, to become a more thorough examination of the evolution of ideological conditions that leads to “Stalinism”. It is even entirely conceivable that an Arendtian critique of “the avant-garde” as being in fact the vanguard of “totalitarianism” could be a liberal offshoot of this interpretation.²¹⁰ The only reason this later position is not possible is that the liberal intellectual of the post-60s West is not solely concerned with condemning “really existing socialism”, it is also, and probably more, concerned – following the reading we made of this problem with Tafuri’s help in Part II – with maintaining the privileged specificity of intellectual labour in the capitalist general distribution of labour. This, not condemning “Stalinism”, is what requires heroicising “the avant-garde”. 1971’s Tafuri proposes the reading – and this thesis supports and contributes to that reading – that the “ideology of planning” of “the avant-garde” falls in the face of the historical conditions for the advent of real planning, both East and West. The Soviet “avant-garde” is more useful than any Western “avant-gardes” for the proto-post-modern Western intellectual. It is, in fact, uniquely useful. Because, in falling to the Soviet planning of “really existing socialism”, instead of the Keynesian planning of New Deal market capitalism, it falls squarely to politics at their most categorical. “The avant-garde” must be preserved at all costs, with the Soviet “avant-

²¹⁰ Indeed the reading Boris Groys makes of it only avoids being so for its utter refusal to pronounce moral judgements on “totalitarianism”, to an extent that it is instead pointing out an incompatibility between the liberal love for “the avant-garde” and the liberal hatred of “Stalinism”.

garde” as its main historical avatar, for the alternative of its collapse serves as an extreme historical demonstration of the role of the intellectual as follower and servant, not as leader and master. The collapse of “the avant-garde” demands from the intellectual a clear choice – to become the willing servant of revolutionary politics and abandon their petty-bourgeois class privilege – an organic intellectual of the working class as Gramsci would put it – or remain a liberal champion of their own privilege attempting to shackle revolutionary politics to their own cultural direction – and therefore, objectively the willing servant of capitalist management, an organic intellectual of the bourgeoisie.

The period between the 60s and 70s intuited this. As the middle classes consolidated, liberal-bourgeois conceptions dominated the “left”, “democracy” replaced “socialism”, and “left” academia rose to replace political economy and class politics with cultural studies and cultural politics. The “historical avant-garde” was resuscitated, and having been dislodged from its practice by the advent of post-war real planning, was given refuge in the safe spaces of academic historiography. The Soviet “avant-garde” added an extra layer to this ideological sequence – for in this instance the lost heroes of the heroic past, imbued with fatherly piety, made their redemptory return not only to the present, but also to the West, where the liberal new “lefts” would lovingly protect them, not only from the predations of capitalism, but also from the censorship of “really existing socialism”. The self-serving nature of this foundational self-narrative of “left” cultural academia, where the Soviet “avant-garde” has an increasing centrality, would grow to become crystallised in architectural form as the 70s approach the 80s, and onwards.

5 – Drawing Lines III: The Finishing Line of “the Avant-garde” Engagement without Politics

“The project” in real planning

In 1978, revered professor of architecture, urban design and planning at the Architectural Association in London, Arthur Korn, died. This was one of those moments when fortune intervenes to make sure that a character dies exactly when the plot of history demands it. Korn had been a maximum exponent of that first generation of post-war teachers who taught architecture as Europe was being rebuilt. In the *in memoriam* dedicated to him in the December issue of the following year of *Architectural Association Quarterly*, the editor Dennis Sharp described him as:

“(…) *the living embodiment of the continental modern movement in Britain.*”²¹¹

While Stephen Rosenberg mentioned he:

“(…) *professed to be a Socialist, a Marxist even (…).*”²¹²

Arthur Korn had been one of those young German architects who were living through the rise of the “historical avant-garde” in “the 20s”. He had finished his education in 1911 before the Great War, and after it he had functioned within the vague central-European “constructivist” movement El Lissitzky and Ehrenburg had been Soviet ambassadors to. He describes some of these interactions in an article he wrote on himself for the December 1957 issue of *Architectural Association Journal*, noting specifically the exhibition of Russian “constructivists” in Berlin and the influence of OSA’s journal *Sovremenaya Arkhitektura*.²¹³ He had been one of the communist-aligned members of that architectural “avant-garde”, having been part of not only the broader arts November Group, founded in 1922, and the architectural group Ring, founded in 1924, but also of the Collective for Socialist Building, founded in 1929, that developed a plan

²¹¹ Dennis SHARP, “Arthur Korn: in memoriam”, in *Architectural Association Quarterly* vol.2 nr.3 (1979), pp.52

²¹² Stephen ROSENBERG, “Arthur Korn: in memoriam”, in *Architectural Association Quarterly* vol.2 nr.3 (1979), pp.50

²¹³ Arthur KORN, “Arthur Korn: 1981 to the Present Day”, in *Architectural Association Journal* Vol.73 Nr.817 (Dec. 1957), pp.114-135

for Berlin. In the same year he designed a tourist shop in central Berlin for the Soviet government, and toured the Soviet coasts of the Black and Caspian seas by Soviet invitation to prepare a competition for a series of hotels. In 1934 he visited London for the CIAM meeting of that year, and after two years in Yugoslavia designing factories and urban plans, he settled in London permanently in 1937. Following the CIAM resolution to produce studies for 31 towns all over the world, he took charge in 1938 of the Town Planning Committee of the 1933-founded Modern Architectural Research Group (MARS). The resulting MARS Plan, published in the *Architectural Association Journal* in 1942 in the direct aftermath of the London Blitz, would establish the foundation of his approach to teaching in the AA, from 1945 onwards.

The December issue of 1957 of the *Architectural Association Journal* dedicated a section to this personal trajectory of Korn, navigating the struggles in the discipline since the dawn of “modernism”. In the introduction to it, Brian Housden writes:

“The nostalgia felt in Britain today for the twenties needs some explanation. Why should so many architects feel this considerable interest in the buildings either proposed or built at this time? Are the twenties taking the place of antiquity as a store of useful ideas to be exploited?”

(...) Comparing the little we know about the twenties with work built today, since the requirements for most building types have not changed during the last thirty years it seems reasonable to make such a comparison; the architects of the twenties are seen to have given their buildings a significance and dynamic quality absent from later work. (...) [Korn’s] work is not only historically interesting but also has considerable relevance for us today.”²¹⁴

Housden is not here talking about the Soviet “20s”, but “the 20s” in general. We see how “the historiographical link” is functioning in 1950s Britain, as “modernism” is in that country becoming mainstream. But Housden’s mention of a historical permanence of “requirements for most building types” between the then and his now suggests that the concern is mostly connected with the practical problems of the time, namely reconstruction and housing. There is artistic admiration, but framed within a notion that “the avant-gardes” of “the 20s” had been the ones who had begun addressing these issues. The ideology of the profession seems to function, at this time, somewhat differently. Tafuri diagnosed the death of “the project” in the 30s. As the demands of actual planning impose themselves, the “ideology of planning” fails. His claim is a

²¹⁴ Brian HOUSDEN, Introduction to Arthur KORN, “Arthur Korn: 1981 to the Present Day”, in *Architectural Association Journal* Vol.73 Nr.817 (Dec. 1957), p.114

bit exaggerated, owing to the deficiencies in his understanding of “ideology” we examined in Part II. The ideology, as we see here, didn’t fail entirely, it merely started being purged of its historically false elements, becoming largely dominated by the technical rather than the cultural. Of course, since the cultural “project” of “the 20s” produced a culturalisation of politics in great measure through a culturalisation of technology and technique, the purging never really could end, for the liberal professional would continue to struggle with politics for a position of leadership on the basis of culturalised technique alone, even if the cultural revolution no longer applied. But there is a degree of truth to the implication of Tafuri’s claim, which is that the post-30s period is in many ways a post-“project” period for architecture. We could say that if the discipline still maintains its grasp on “the aura”, the profession is for practical purposes forced to relinquish most of it.

It’s in this context of the 50s present that Korn functions as a link to “the 20s” past. Korn is an interesting case of a politically militant, communist-aligned German architect of the 20s that did not leave Germany for the Soviet Union, like the groups of Hannes Meyer, Ernst May and Kurt Mayer did. His settling in London produced a somewhat unique situation, where instead of being directly involved in the complexities of socialist planning, and being forced to evolve with the political-economical situation of pre-war accelerated industrialisation and post-war reconstruction, the communist-aligned architect ended up producing planning efforts for a city that had been somewhat destroyed by the war, but not too much destroyed, and on top of that probably the most liberal-bourgeois capital in Europe, where the communist threat never really became present. Maybe precisely because of that, his work after World War II is an interesting mix of the post-war mainstream “modernist” pragmatism of welfare state planning – when state-building of a lot of houses quickly and cheaply was the top priority of a post-“project” architectural discipline – with a continuation of an “avant-garde” conception of architectural intervention. The MARS plan exists precisely in this place, a macro-study proposing the radical conversion of one of the the least destroyed European capitals in 1945 into a system of eight linear cities oriented North-South connected via a central East-West axis along the direction of Oxford Street. It is an explicit application of OSA disurbanist principles, following Nikolai Miliutin’s model. And yet Korn did not become an anti-Stalinist ideologue who denounced the betrayal of the revolution in the face of the defeat of “avant-garde” thought in the Soviet Union. He remained an advocate for Soviet planning throughout, having dedicated significant sections of his 1953 book, *History Builds the Town*, to it. There, he spoke of it in the most favourable terms, in a type of discourse that had barely any architecture in it, instead focusing on the economic issues and planning principles. He described the achievements in increased production, the different planning organisms and their interaction, the scale of new

town construction, the regional levels of administration. He dedicated a small sub-section to Miliutin in his chapter on Theory and Practice, right before the sub-section on the MARS plan. The book, read from the vantage point of contemporary standards, carries a certain *naïveté* in how it relates to Soviet planning, and planning in general. And yet, it functions as a good example of the mode of thinking of the architectural discipline in those post-war, post-“project” years when actualising the plan was more important than producing an “avant-garde” image of it as a cultural construct. Even as far as that image remained, through Arthur Korn, and migrated to London, it was an ideological layer on top of actual policies and practices, and could not historically anymore be a replacement of them.

The book ends with the following passage:

*“Our capitalist society of poverty and wealth experiences growing difficulties in the field of reconstruction. The developments in the USSR and Eastern Europe, on the other hand, have made an essential contribution to the realisation of coordinated planning. Between 1925 and 1950 a strong mutual influence could be recognised: the East trying to catch up with modern Western technique, calling in teams of western planners for reconstruction of new towns; the West being impressed by the possibility of controlled planning on a national scale. It is eminently desirable that such fruitful collaboration between East and West should continue and be strengthened.”*²¹⁵

Such collaboration was not particularly big during the first three of decades after the war, the decades of reconstruction when the actual plan dominated, and “the project” subsided. And yet, those were the decades when, on both sides of the wall, capitalism and socialism shared much of the same approach, for that approach was constrained by shared economic conditions. European private investment had neither the capacity nor the interest to expand its activity to housing and urban development. The relative amount of constant capital was so low, and working class political pressure was so high, that the state could, and indeed had to, take charge of vast areas of national production in most countries, nationalising not just urban development as such but many strategic industrial sectors, creating public jobs by investing directly in the economy, and constructing the large array of public services that became known as the Welfare State. For thirty years European capitalism developed in these conditions. This would come to an end during the 70s, the material reality that defined the Western “left” dissolving just as West intellectuals were rediscovering socialist architecture – not the architecture of the really existing

²¹⁵ Arthur KORN, *History Builds the Town*, Lund Humphries, London, 1953, p.101

plan of really existing socialism, but that of what the West called “the avant-garde”. For the life of Arthur Korn, the West paid no heed to the East, even while it was more or less doing the same thing as the East, though to a much less systematic degree. As he died, however, in 1978, the West was finally listening to him, and taking a keen interest in the East. But not in the way he wanted.

“The avant-garde” in scholarship

We’ve seen how a historiography of Soviet architecture had developed in continental Western Europe already since the early 60s – what we called the first historiographical phase. In Italy, starting with the 1962 special issue of *Casabella-Continuità* and 1963 book by Vittorio de Feo, to 1976, when Vieri Quillici, and Marco de Michelis with Ernesto Pasini, published the last two of the series of books that had begun with Quillici’s own *L’Architettura del Costruttivismo* in 1969. In France, Anatole Kopp had started his own series of books in 1967 with *Ville et Revolution*, and ended it in 1978 with *L’Architecture de la Période Stalinienne*. So there was clearly an interest in the topic, but it was restricted to a politically defined audience aligned with the post-60s rising European “new lefts”. Outside of Italy, where the extension of this audience was quite large, and to a lesser degree France, this was still a relatively niche subject-matter. Less niche, probably because less politicised, was the also emerging Western historiography of the Soviet visual-arts in the same period, led by Anglo-American efforts. We’ve seen how this has a frail relation to architecture, but enough that Kenneth Frampton brought attention to it, through Camilla Gray’s work on El Lissitzky, already in 1966 in *Architectural Design*. We’ve also seen how a modicum of interest in Soviet architecture develops in England, through contacts with the emerging generation of Soviet historians that were leading the rehabilitation of “constructivism” since the mid-60s. The February 1970 special issue of *A.D.*, and the subsequent book by Oleg Shvidkovskii *Building in the USSR* of 1971, would be followed by a gradual expansion of interest in the topic within the Architectural Association, that after the unit reforms led by Alvin Boyarsky in the same year would come to be a hotbed for the Soviet “avant-garde”. The school’s journal Architectural Association Quarterly would produce a few incursions into Soviet architecture in the 70s, starting with a review article written in the first issue of 1972 by Anatole Kopp of the European bibliography on the subject. In the second issue of 1973, Janet Payne and Iain McNicol, two students who had visited the USSR to see the works of “constructivism”, published an account of the visit, and William Chitkin wrote an article on the complexities and contradictions of Frank Lloyd Wright’s visit to the Soviet Union at the time of the 1937 International Congress of Architects what was hosted it. In the second

issue of 1976 Kestutis Paul Zygas wrote an article on the multiple influences and meanings of Tatlin's Tower, and in the third issue of that year William Curtis broached the subject through an article on Berthold Lubetkin. This sequence would culminate in 1979, the year after Arthur Korn died and in which third issue his *in memoriam* would be published. The immediately preceding issue, the second issue of 79, was entirely dedicated to Soviet architecture, covering a very large time span. It mixed coverage of "the avant-garde" with an equal coverage of "Stalinist" architecture, and also of the 19th century. This issue of *A.A.Q.* functions as a "state of the art" of sorts of what was the Western understanding of the history of Soviet architecture in the turn to the 80s. In it we can glimpse several important elements of what would define the emergence of the now canonical narrative.

"Stalinist" architecture is introduced in an article by Antonia Cunliffe on the competition for the Palace of the Soviets between 1931 and 1933, and has an article all to itself by S. Frederick Starr. An Anglo-American historiography of "Stalinist" architecture would remain relatively small, going on until the early 90s, and would alternate between following Kopp's line²¹⁶ and a challenging of it. This issue falls in the latter category, with Cunliffe and Starr both attempting an interpretation that is less political and more defined by intra-professional issues.

Another symptomatic element is the way "The avant-garde" is treated, that seems to merge together characteristics of both the visual-arts historiography dominant in Anglo-American academia and the continental architectural historiography. "The avant-garde" appears through an article by Christina Lodder on "constructivist" theatre, bringing Bann's historiographical "tradition of constructivism" directly into architectural circles; and is also represented in Cunliffe's article on the Palace of the Soviets. The architectural "avant-garde" then appears at the moment of its "constructivist" genesis, following the visual-arts "origin story" of Anglo-American historiographical tradition, and at the moment of its death, as defined by Anatole Kopp's politically-motivated narrative, even though Cunliffe is quite careful in avoiding a politicisation of the event in any simple "Stalin-crush-modernism" formula. The visual-arts "origin story" is further reinforced by the extension into the nineteenth century provided by an article by Evgeniia Kirichenko's on architectural discourse in Russia in the nineteenth and first decade of the twentieth century, which produces at the scale of this special issue what was customary in the Anglo-American visual-arts historiography. Thus we see an

²¹⁶ See Hugh D. HUDSON, *Blueprints and Blood: Stalinization of Soviet Architecture 1917-1937*, Princeton University Press, New York, 1994

early expression of how the generally depoliticised character of the visual-arts Anglo-American historiography would be extended into the architectural historiography. The architectural post-23 “avant-garde” – up till then mostly the domain of continental historians who gave it an “origin story” in politics – is, in its British version, instead given a more art-historical “origin story” founded in the pre-23 visual-arts narrative of Anglo-American historians.

The issue ends with two contributions by Catherine Cooke. The first is the translation of an interview of the previous year, in the Soviet journal *Arkhitektura*, with Oleg Shvidkovskii on the problem of national traditions. The second is a bibliographical roundup on the topic, an update and significant extension of the one made by Kopp in the same journal in 72. This is a first incursion of Cooke’s work in British architecture journals, which would build up from then on, to define a period during the 80s when the Western historiography of Soviet architecture reached its final form. The discipline of architecture would in London during this decade lead a full merger between the historiography of the pre-23 visual-arts “constructivism” and the historiography of post-23 architectural “constructivism”, assuming the structure we keep till now under the headline of “the avant-garde”. This came with a wave of extremely valuable work and empirical research, a value multiplied after the dissolution of the USSR and the increased ease of access to the relevant material. But it also came at the cost of historiographical precision, for as the two historiographies merged, so too did merge the properties of each of the two “constructivisms” they separately dealt with. The intrinsic cultural politicality of the “project” of “constructivism” as it is understood by the continental architectural historians was fused with the relative imprecision, via depoliticisation, of the umbrella term “constructivism” of the Anglo-American historians of the visual-arts. As such, an aura of implicit politicality became associated with the vague definition of “the avant-garde” as a new meta-category that really does not require any specific articulation with any actual politics. This phenomenon has two sides to it. The development of scholarly work during the 80s is one of them, but it must be understood within the ideological context created by the other, which is the changing needs of Western architectural practice.

One of the most interesting points that should be noted about the development of a Western historiography of Soviet architecture in the 80s is that interest in it subsides everywhere, except Britain, where it grows exponentially. And with the notable exception of Alessandro de Magistris, who would bring the Italian tradition of research on the subject to the

end of the century from 1988 on,²¹⁷ Anglo-American academia would practically monopolise the field from then on. The presence of Soviet historians, which had defined the first significant English-language architectural publication on the subject in 1970, would continue to be felt in the English-speaking world as their work developed. In 1974, Anatole Senkevich Jr. published *Soviet Architecture 1917-1962: A Bibliographical Guide to Source Material*, a book that embodies the gradual opening-up of Soviet primary sources to Anglo-American academia. Eight years later in 1982, he would publish his translation of Ginzburg's *Style and Epoch*. Khan-Magomedov would see his work regularly published in English: *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture* in 1983; *Alexander Vesnin and Russian Constructivism* in 1986, *Rodchenko; The Complete Work* in 1986. By the end of the 80s, the other Soviet authors were being published in English as well. Notable examples are Andrei Ikonnikov's *Russian Architecture of the Soviet Period* in 1988; Andrei Gozak's *Ivan Leonidov* in the same year; Alexei Tarkhanov and Sergei Kavtaradze's *Stalinist Architecture* in 1992; Alexander Ryabushin and Nadia Smolina's *Landmarks of Soviet Architecture* in 1992 as well.

From 1983 on, the Soviet "avant-garde" would become a mainstay of the journal *Architectural Design*. It is there that the term "the avant-garde" for early Soviet production is finally brought from the visual-arts into architecture and crystallised in its current form. This happens through frequent contributions by Catherine Cooke, who is guest editor of four special issues between 1983 and 1991: *Russian Avant-garde: Art and Architecture* in 83; *Iakov Chernikhov: Fantasy and Construction* in 84; *Uses of Tradition in Russian and Soviet Architecture* in 87; and *The Avant-garde: Russian Architecture in the Twenties* in 91. Cooke also publishes two articles in *A.D.* in 86, *Ivan Leonidov: Vision and Historicism* in issue 6, and *Soviet Perspectives: Architectural Education* in issue 9. The first two special issues are expressive of how the visual-arts narrative and the architectural narrative are fully merged in this period. The 1983 issue's first half follows the structure of the 1979 issue of *A.A.Q.* closely. It starts on pre-revolutionary Russia – this time an article by Lindsey Hughes on Petrine Russian

²¹⁷ Though undoubtedly in a framework much influenced by the Anglo-American tradition. See:

Alessandro DE MAGISTRIS, *La Città di Transizione: Politiche Urbane e Ricerche Tipologiche nell'URSS degli Anni Venti*, Il Quadrante Edizioni, Torino, 1988

Alessandro DE MAGISTRIS, *URSS Anni 30-50: Paesaggi dell'Utopia Staliniana*, Mazzotta, Milan, 1997

Alessandro DE MAGISTRIS, *La Costruzione della Città Totalitaria: Il Piano di Mosca e il Dibattito sulla Città Sovietica tra gli Anni Venti e Cinquanta*, Città Studi Edizioni, 1995

architecture treatises – goes on into the “avant-garde” in the visual-arts with Christina Lodder – this time on the Costakis Collection, one of the largest collections of Soviet “avant-garde” painting in the West after George Costakis moved to Greece in 1977, and the same collection that would be attached to Richard Pare’s architectural photographs twenty-five years later in 2008 – and only then addresses architecture proper. After Lodder follow three articles – One by Cooke on the design method of the “constructivist” group OSA as formalised by Ginsburg, one by Irina Kokkinaki on OSA’s exhibition of modern architecture of 1927 at Vkhutemas, and one again by Cooke on the differences between the OSA “constructivists” and the ASNOVA-connected, but mostly independent Melnikov. After this, the issue does the symptomatic move of focusing on Iakov Chernikhov, with an article by his grandson Andrei Chernikhov and another by Cooke. Focusing on Chernikhov has the peculiar consequence of giving the issue a chronological structure, since his work is most poignant after 1930, while wrapping backwards in terms of the type of issues being debated. As we’ve seen earlier, Chernikhov, with El Lissitzky, was foremost representative of the architectural expression of “constructivism” in the Anglo-American visual-arts historiography of the early 70s, while remaining, as far as content goes, completely outside of the actual architectural debate of the late 20s and early 30s, being more of a very late manifestation of visual-arts “constructivism” at the time when it had already been fully subsumed by the architectural discipline. As the contradictions of “the avant-garde” piled up in 1930 with the application of the really existing plan – as we have seen in the previous chapter – this 1983 issue of *A.D.* joins 1930 Chernikhov in his artistic, outmoded and inconsequential flights of fancy. Where the *A.A.Q.* issue of 1979 had ended “the avant-garde” with the historical transition to “Stalinist” architecture, this issue ends with a return to the ideology of “the avant-garde” at its most a-historical. This is compounded by the dedication of the 1984 special issue entirely to Chernikhov.

This shows what here we should note about this “second phase” of the Western historiography of Soviet architecture. The emergence of the explicit historiographical category of “the avant-garde” appears with great scholarly work, but also with a general depoliticisation of the problems inherent to the category of “the avant-garde” in general terms. This depoliticisation has some advantages. It frees scholars from certain judgemental Western liberal frameworks limiting their perception of the material. This is most evident in the critique of the “totalitarian model” as applied to “Stalinist” architecture, as S. Frederick Starr showed in *A.A.Q.* in 1979 and as Catherine Cooke would again show in 1997 in the *Journal of Design History*, issue 2, on her article *Beauty as a Route to the Radiant Future*. It also shows in instances where “the avant-garde” is shown to be less inherently politicised and more opportunistic in taking advantage of the political conditions of the post-revolutionary moment, as Pamela Kachurin

does in 2013 in *Making Modernism Soviet: The Russian Avant-Garde in the Early Soviet Era*, a very good explicit case for the notion, dominant in the Anglo-American early 70s visual-arts historiography, that “avant-garde” artists were more caught by the revolution than an inherent part of it, though twisted around to portray them as a kind of anti-heroes.²¹⁸ But this depoliticisation gets rid of these liberal ideological constraints as they exist at an explicit political level, to then reinforce them at a cultural level – and so, arguably, it goes back around and cannot perform any real revision of the historiographical macro-narrative.

Cooke’s work continues into a more thoroughly architectural realm. The 1991 special issue of *A.D.* no longer spends any time on the pre-23 visual-arts, neither does it return to them via any 1930 late quasi-architectural specimen of them, consisting instead of a compilation of translations of text by multiple early Soviet architects, together with illustrations of their work, meant to showcase the diversity of approaches during the period of “the avant-garde”. Cooke then publishes *Soviet Architectural Competitions* together with Igor Kazus in 1992, and *Russian Avant-garde: Theories of Art, Architecture and the City* in 1995. This is the last of her major publications, since afterwards she would be championing the cause of conservation of Soviet “modernist” works as chair of the UK section of Docomomo, and her early death prevented her from continuing her work into the 21st century. Her work remains one of the, if not the most rigorous and thorough efforts to document and interpret the Soviet “avant-garde” in architecture, to such an extent that it effectively defined the use of the term itself as far as scholarly work is concerned. And yet, it was always limited by the condition of existential ideological doubt the discipline was going through in the West between the 70s and the 80s. Despite its breath, it never really managed to address the structural problem of “the avant-garde”, for even as the relative depoliticisation of its historiography allowed for increased rigour in its study, it also rendered impossible the examination of its ideological conundrum, which rests entirely on the complex and contradictory nature of the way architecture as a cultural field

²¹⁸ Kachurin does this mainly through Malevich though, who should never be perceived as representative of the Soviet architectural debates and circles. The architects of the post-23 “avant-garde” were certainly much more genuine in their “technicised propaganda”, as Tafuri puts it, while seeking to give cultural form to the revolution. Their opportunism existed only as a deep ideological condition.

See Pamela KACHURIN, *Making Modernism Soviet: The Russian Avant-Garde in the Early Soviet Era, 1918-1928*, Northwestern University Press, Chicago, 2013

historically interacts with politics. In fact, efforts to address this issue at the structural level are seriously limited. Apart from Tafuri – whose application of a crypto-Marxist analysis to a field he had limited empirical knowledge of we have already covered extensively and which advantages we have noted and systematically employed – only two efforts really were made, both by Soviet émigrés: Vladimir Paperny in 1979 with *Architecture in the Age of Stalin: Culture Two*, a thesis only published in the West, in English by Cambridge University Press, in 2011;²¹⁹ and Boris Groys in 1988 with *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*.

The first is a structuralist attempt to scalpelise the internal mechanisms of “Stalinist” culture, as opposed to the constant reading of it as some form of “the other” defined only by how it is not “us”. It however remains locked in the clear distinction between two systems that alternate in Russia, with a liberal-pluralistic “culture one” dominating in the post-revolutionary period, defined by horizontality and dispersal, and then being replaced by an authoritarian “culture two” as the new systems are re-formalised and centralised in vertical manners. It follows a deeply implied notion that events are determined by cultural frameworks, which obviously puts it on the opposite end of both Tafuri’s position and that of this thesis. But it remains probably the greatest effort yet to read the period of “socialist-realism” on its own merits, even if the category of “ideology” rests fully outside of it. It being a fundamentally culturalist study, it cannot read the problem on the basis of a debate between, precisely, culturalism vs politics.

The second effort is not much less culturalist, but views the developments in the Soviet arts – it doesn’t really deal with architecture – the other way around. According to Groys, the art of “Stalinism” functioned as a universalisation and radicalisation of the cultural “project” of “the avant-garde”, finally bringing art down unto life at the same time it aestheticised the entirety of life itself. This again leaves the central conflict this thesis is dealing with outside the argument, but it does carry an interesting premise in denying the “end line” of “the avant-garde” in the terms it has always been accepted since “Stalinist” critique itself invented the umbrella term “constructivism” in the mid-30s to categorise the entirety of the first twenty years of Soviet artistic production as “formalist”. For Groys, totalitarian politics don’t come to crush artistic liberty, as the Anglo-American tradition sees it, or revolutionary cultural progress, as Kopp-like

²¹⁹ It was published in America earlier in 1985, but in the original Russian, by Ardis. Catherine Cooke reviewed it for *The Slavonic and East European Review* in the third issue of 2003.

narratives do, but instead they fully materialise the inherent totalitarianism of the cultural revolution of “the avant-garde”. It’s easy to see how this argument is radically opposed to half of the position of this thesis, in seeing the victory of “socialist-realism” as the victory of culturalism instead of its defeat, and at the same time how it structurally agrees with the other half, since it functions as a culturalist version of the formula this thesis uses, from Tafuri, of the defeat of the “avant-garde” “ideology of the plan” as running parallel to the advent of the really existing plan. Groys’ remains the most challenging position to the contemporary liberal culturalist framework, even while coming from within, since it effectively negates the possibility of the typical dissociative interpretation that isolates the petty-bourgeois cultural “project” from the realities of its political application. Groys essentially says “you started it, now don’t you come and complain” to the petty-bourgeois cultural intellectual who adopts the Trotskyite position of the defeated tragic hero just because he, instead of the Party, didn’t get to be the leader of the really exiting revolution.

These two efforts exist largely outside what is the effective evolution of the dominant Western narrative between the mid-70s and the 80s. Paperny remains unknown until 2011. Groys makes his case in 1988, at the very end of the decade between the mid-70s and the mid-80s when the Western cultural intellectual was reforming its self-image, reinventing “the project” of cultural leadership with the emerging category of “the avant-garde”, after the really existing demise of the Keynesian plan.

“The avant-garde” in practice

Catherine Cooke, nearing the end of her final 1995 book *Russian Avant-garde: Theories of Art, Architecture and the City*, injects into her work on the history of Soviet architecture a historiographical chapter. This chapter 8 is titled *Melnikov and the Changing Focus of Western Literature on the Russian Avant-garde*. In this chapter, Cooke returns to Constantin Melnikov with the same interpretation she had constructed in her article in the 1983 special issue of *A.D.* directly comparing his design approach to OSA’s discourse. She perceives a uniqueness to Melnikov amidst the whole Soviet “avant-garde”, on the grounds of his eminently practical vision of “modernism”. It makes a degree of sense. Melnikov was largely apolitical and an architect in a technical-professional sense, and stayed away from the ideological debates in the field. He had built work, which was widely acknowledged by all factions, complimented by OSA and evading attacks by VOPRA. There is a certain logic to him being favoured by the British historian in her search for a less ideological narrative, as opposed to that of Kopp that favoured OSA. There was less “project” in Melnikov, which made him closer to Western post-

war post-project mainstream “modernism”. And the “project” of his time being conveyed through the “ideology of the plan”, there was also less “plan” in Melnikov, which made him simultaneously closer to the Western post-60s post-post-project emerging post-modernism. Melnikov functioned well as an object simultaneously for a critique of “the project” and a critique of “the plan”, which come together in Britain in the 70s. The critique of “the project”, which by then is “the project” of “modernism”, would however come to be subsumed by the critique of “the plan”, the result being not a “plan” finally free of “the project”, but a “project” finally free of “the plan”.

Cooke senses the anxiety of the time since the onset of her work, having consistently pointed out how there were similarities between the issues debated during the Soviet 30s and those debated in the Western 70s and 80s where she was writing. She doesn’t go down to the structural issue of “the project”, but identifies how the ideology of “modernism” is challenged, in both cases, as being too elitist, and apart from the needs of the popular masses. She points that out explicitly in her very first contribution in a British journal, as she introduces Shvidkovskii’s interview in the 1979 special issue of *A.A.Q.* on this very topic, and she dedicates the entire 1987 special issue of *A.D.* to the *uses of tradition in Russian and Soviet architecture*. As time passes, she most likely grasps certain implications of the way the material she is uncovering is used in the debates that dominate the Western architectural discipline. In 1995, she ends up dedicating a chapter, not to Melnikov *per se*, but to Melnikov in relation to the Western interpretation of the Soviet “avant-garde”, particularly why he had been at first sidelined in favour of more ideological agents like OSA, and why he was later preferred. She sees Melnikov being vindicated, mostly, by S. Frederick Starr’s biography of him, published in 1978 by Princeton University Press. But she sees interest coming from more architecturally engaged ideological agents at the time as well, notably, the chief ideologue of the post-plan “project”, Charles Jencks:

*“If only Melnikov, Goff, the Expressionists, had carried the day over the international style, we would have had a richer language of architecture. As it is, they remain a missing link back to the fuller language of romantic classicism.”*²²⁰

²²⁰ Charles JENCKS, “The Lone Star”, in *The Architects’ Journal* (16 May 1979), pp.1009-1010, cited by Catherine COOKE, *Russian Avant-Garde: Theories of Art, Architecture and the City*, Academy Editions, London, 1995, p.142

This writes Jencks in his review of Starr's biography of Melnikov in London's *The Architect's Journal* in May of 1979, mimicking Arthur Korn's wish for a greater attention to be paid by the West to the Soviet experience but a month after A.A.Q. had lamented his passing. For Jencks however, it's not the reality of "the plan" that must be learned. His wish takes the form of "the historiographical link", a link to an architecture that had lost the historical battle to the architecture of the "really existing plan". The architecture of the "really existing plan" is of course for Jencks not just "Stalinism", but Western "modernism" as well. The anti-totalitarianism of the Western liberal intellectual is then extended to any and all forms of "the plan", even the capitalist ones, and the architecture of the Soviet "avant-garde" comes, not to serve the Western plan as Korn would have wanted, neither anymore to infuse the Western self-image with the "ideology of the plan" of a "constructivist" cultural revolution as Kopp intended, but as a vehicle for the altogether liberation of the Western cultural agent from "the plan".

This was not the first time Jencks made an explicit appeal to a "missing link" to the past in this historiographical redemptory form. It was, in fact, a recurring theme for him throughout the 70s, as he was developing his own critique of "modernism" towards a more formal use of the past as expressive linguistic convention. The nature of the redemption changed over the course of this period, as Jencks progressively constructed a clearer separation from "modernism" for the architecture of the new era of the post-plan. In 1979, as we've seen, the "missing link" was Melnikov and what he calls expressionist architecture. In 1977 in his *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, the "missing link" is the Vienna Hoffs, explicitly referred to as such inasmuch as they exemplify in modern public housing the "radical eclecticism" Jencks invents and advocates.²²¹ Melnikov also shows up in this book, but since Jencks knew nothing about him yet he is presented as a textbook example of "modernist" functionalist aesthetic as opposed to precisely the expressionist architecture Jencks would pair him with two years later.²²² The first moment Jencks comes up with the "missing link" is as early as 1971, in his review article of the English publication of Ulrich Conrads' *Programmes and Manifestoes on 20th Century Architecture*, a compilation that brought to the English language much that it was up till then inaccessible. This review article is titled, precisely, *The*

²²¹ Charles JENCKS, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, Rizzoli International, New York, 1977, p.135

²²² An image of the Russakov Club is shown as the origin of "the «word» for auditorium in the language of modern architecture" within a section dedicated to the Sydney Opera House that breaks this rule.

Charles JENCKS, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, Rizzoli International, New York, 1977, p.44

Missing Link. In it, Jencks divides what is, for all intents and purposes, “the avant-garde”, into seven trends. There is no need to identify each of them, for he also immediately groups them up into two broader trends:

*“Modern architecture as a revolutionary, political and social movement and as a creative, transcendent, critical movement. (...) The majority of the manifestoes say – «Smash the current clichés and institutions – create a new style and mode of action». (...) The other main idea – politics and social ideology – is equally prevalent (...). The following quotes will start to give some idea of what this missing link between all the other influences is – politics.”*²²³

This sounds slightly striking – Charles Jencks is saying that politics itself is the “missing link” that unites all the trends of “the avant-garde” with one another. In this, he is mostly working within the same kind of political critique of architectural discourse that we can see in Tafuri in the same period – not the approach we would expect him to take, quite far from the “missing link” as a link to a richer language of pre-“modernism” he shows us after 1977. He proceeds to go through the seven trends, identifying in the texts of “the avant-garde” explicit and implicit political ideas. It is through these that he forms that division between the two great notions, creative freedom and social militancy. And here is the crux of the matter, for both of these, within Jencks’ text, are political. The last of the seven trends he looks at, and by far the one he spends the most space on, is called *Marxist materialism and transformation of society*. In this section he goes through the texts Conrads had selected from the other side of the wall, and references also Gray, Kopp and Quillici. And it is from his short description of the Soviet “avant-garde” that Jencks extracts his conclusion:

“If this [Soviet “constructivism”] represents one far point in socialist theory, then combined with the ideas on freedom of the anarcho-syndicalists [trend four in his enumeration] (...) one can see the logical strength of such a dual position as libertarian socialism. For what is more logically just than that every man should have an equal social opportunity as well as the various freedoms which define his potential? Equality and freedom, the two different political qualities that turn out to be in practice somewhat complementary. If one were to generalise from the seven political positions outlined here, one would find this basic duality. The elitists, individualists and idealists insisting on the right to creative freedom and the populists, syndicalists, technocrats and Marxists insisting on man’s social consciousness. Unfortunately the one tradition often tends to ignore the truth of the other and the resultant dialectic instead of progressing adds up to zero – a mutual

²²³ Charles JENCKS, “The Missing Link”, in *Architectural Association Quarterly* vol.3 nr.2 (Apr-Jun 1974), p.54

*cancellation. This is not surprising when one thinks how little politics has been discussed in the architectural debate. The other main species – technology, aesthetics, functionalism – have all had their day and if their present state of health seems to be flagging perhaps this is because only the missing link can really give them the creative energy that they need.”*²²⁴

And so we see how in 1971, the way in which the debate on what comes after “the plan” was beginning in London, centred in the Architectural Association just as it was doing away with a central curriculum for a State-funded British studentship – precisely because such state funds were done away with in a manifestation at the scale of the school of the beginning of the dissolution of Keynesian economics. The previous system, that in which Arthur Korn made his images of the “really existing plan” in the era it was fact, comes to be substituted by an assortment of units that teachers on one-year contracts had to sell in the “free marketplace of ideas” to a global studentship of international elites, a manifestation at the scale of the school of liberal utopianism as an ideological front for what would become the generalised neo-liberal deregulation of labour in academia as well. And as this debate begins, in this new material conjuncture of architectural teaching, the Soviet “avant-garde” comes as the “missing link” through which the notion of creative freedom – that defined the Anglo-American historiography of Soviet visual-arts – and the notion of political engagement – that defined the continental historiography of Soviet architecture – would be fully merged into a single narrative where freedom is inherently engagement and void of politics. Over the following decade, a new post-plan liberal humanism of abstract freedom would replace the political economy of social-democracy.

This debate spans the 70s, but its ultimate conclusions can be perceived in its early stages. The final issue of 1972 of *A.A.Q.* is dedicated to the problem of *Architecture and Politics*. This issue is composed of a series of articles addressing what is, essentially, a generalised feeling of unease at the status of “the project” at the time. These articles alternate between two types. Some are puerile idealistic affirmations of “the project” in the most abstracted and depoliticised terms possible – against the evils of contemporary politics, appeals to the power of artistic innovation. Henryk Skolimowsky, in his article *Polis and Politics*, inverts historical materialism by claiming that the economic structures of society are determined by ideological frameworks, and therefore, all political attempts to change these structures are doomed to fail if not

²²⁴ Charles JENCKS, “The Missing Link”, in *Architectural Association Quarterly* vol.3 nr.2 (Apr-Jun 1974), p.58

enmeshed in an overarching struggle to change mentalities. Richard Foqué, in *Creativity is Power*, reaffirms the Saint-Simonian notion of the artist as the ultimate wise-man of society, much needed at the time to fight against the technocratic and return to the human. The general message of these contributions is that truly revolutionary work must necessarily be produced at the level of culture, not politics. In fact, politics is perceived as a limitation on cultural creativity, and so is somewhat intrinsically evil.

The other type of article takes the architectural “project” in its historical dimension, and focus on what is its crucial issue at the time – the politics of “modernism”. Martin Steinman writes a remarkably enlightened historical review of the difficulties the vanguard of “modernism” had in developing an operative association between their proposal and political commitment, in *Political Standpoints in CIAM, 1928-1933*, concluding that the “modernist” proposal could never really fully function, even as principle, in capitalism, but that the agents of “modernism” could not either simply become socialist militants and as a consequence relinquish any limited action that might still be possible at a technical level. More pointed as a critique of the contemporary problem, and probably the most influential text of this issue, is Michael Sorkin’s *Down with False Messiahs*. This is a thorough critique of “the project” of “modernism” in structural terms, very close to those of Tafuri and in some instances more rigorous. Sorkin fully describes, in just four pages, the professional ideological deformation of the notion of social transformation intrinsic to the militancy of “the avant-garde”:

*“If the early progenitors of modernism (...) all paid lip service to the influences of utopian socialism, even those tenuous connections were soon obscured by the feeling that it was the architect himself who was to be in control of environmental (...) reform. (...) The logical culmination of this attitude is exemplified by Le Corbusier’s famous statement, «it is a question of building which is at the root of the social unrest today: architecture or revolution». Thus, the inevitable consequence of the intoxication with the utopian mode of thinking within architecture was the conviction that architecture could be a substitute for political action.”*²²⁵

The merits of Sorkin’s approach could not, however, survive the decade. This can already be perceived in 1975, a year which last issue of *A.A.Q.* would invent the category of “post-modernism”. The landmark article of this issue is obviously that of Charles Jencks, *The Rise of*

²²⁵ Michael SORKIN, “Down with False Messiahs”, in *Architectural Association Quarterly* vol.4 nr.4 (Oct-Dec 1972), p.28

Post-Modern Architecture. But the most curious for our purposes is the following piece by Conrad Jameson, *Modern Architecture as an Ideology*, which builds upon Sorkin's argument towards an architectural recipe of "radical traditionalism". Starting with Karl Marx himself to explicitly present "modernism" as the self-serving ideology of a specific professionally defined sub-sect of the petty-bourgeoisie, it moves on to argue for a new humility in the discipline in the form of an acceptance of the existing conditions and its forms. The problem, for Jameson, is not that of the failure of the aspirations for the radical transformation of capitalist society, but the fact that after the failure of the professional images of this transformation to effect it in a revolutionary manner, architects have lost their foremost source of legitimation. Jameson, and Jencks, propose to find a new legitimation in the abandonment of the radical and totalitarian "project" of "modernism" and to replace it with a notion of liberal pluralism founded on the authenticity of an eclectic popular vernacular. As such, an anti-"project" rhetoric would fuel a new post-political practice, where lofty ideals of revolution would no longer mask an architecture in service of liberal capitalist consumerism. Instead, liberal capitalist consumerism would be presented naked as the manifestation of popular will. A truly democratic architecture, instead of forcing on the public what it thinks it needs, would give the public what the public likes.

So we have, on the one hand, the affirmation of an a-political, and even anti-political, "project" of artistic creativity; and on the other hand, a newfound anti-"project" doctrine of post-political consumer ethics. One is not hard pressed to realise that these two approaches are ultimately compatible, in the ideological construction of the contemporary version of liberal-bourgeois thought. Dennis Sharp expresses a version of this in his editorial to the 1975 special issue of *A.A.Q* on *Architecture and Politics*. An ultimately depoliticised reading of politics is there stated as axiomatic:

*"The extreme exponents of today's systemic ideologies have their sights fixed on a new bourgeoisie, the institutionalised classes, who it is argued have succeeded the dead bourgeois class but manifest similar corruptions and ignorances."*²²⁶

This is a particularly operative formulation, since it can encompass the struggle of liberal professionals against the totalitarian impositions of "institutions" – an image of "institutions"

²²⁶ Dennis SHARP, "Architecture and Politics", Editorial, in *Architectural Association Quarterly* vol.4 nr.4 (Oct-Dec 1972), p.2

that is organically identical to that of the right-wing argument against “big government” and the “nanny-state” – at the same time it can also encompass the self-critique of the professional classes in their articulation with these same “institutions”. Thus is the “ideology of the plan” attacked, not on the basis of its ideological deformation of “the plan”, but on the basis of its acceptance of “the plan” as the mode of action. The “modernist” “project” is therefore a mode of collaborationism with the enemy of the individual liberty, of which the cultural agents should be the vanguard. This gives rise to the curious contradiction that while the elitist “project” is denounced in Western “modernism” in the same way as is Soviet totalitarian communism, for both impose “the plan” on the creative professional, the cultural vanguards that struggle for this creative liberation against “the plan” are exalted as exponents of a liberal future – and first among these cultural vanguards is the very “avant-garde” that had invented the very “ideology of the plan” that is now combated, the agents of the Soviet “avant-garde”, that could now be presented as fallen heroes of liberal freedom precisely inasmuch as they had been defeated by “the plan” as it came to actually be. And so of the two quotations Sharp uses, one comes from Kopp, filtered through a reinforcement of the liberal depoliticised understanding of politics that Kopp would have difficulty accepting:

“It was of course the Soviet Union itself that provided the idealistic model for the avant-garde in architecture and the arts from Western Europe to Latin America. If Russia could revolutionise it could also provide a Utopia for creative minds and provide a programme for future society. For the intellectual freedom of action and expression was tantamount to political freedom. (...) Kopp writes:

«Like electrical condensers that transform the nature of the current, the architects’ proposed «social condensers» were to turn the self-centred individual of capitalist society *into a society* in which the interests of each merged with the interests of all.... They consistently emphasised the decisive importance of a socialist transformation of the economic basis of society. It is nonetheless true that they rightly believed that social transformation is not a one-way street and that the environment also plays a part, that architecture and city planning have a formative and educational influence.»²²⁷

So Sharp takes the “social condenser” of “the project” of “constructivism”, which associated itself to the “*socialist transformation of the economic basis of society*”, and reframes

²²⁷ Dennis SHARP, “Architecture and Politics”, Editorial, in *Architectural Association Quarterly* vol.4 nr.4 (Oct-Dec 1972), p.3

it within the liberal struggle for creative freedom against politics. This is no longer the volunteerism of the intellectual caught in revolution constructing an ideological image of “the plan” just before the really existing plan comes to be. This is a version of “the project” that no longer even carries the historical truth of “the plan” within it, to be parsed by a political critique of ideology that, like that of religion as Bürger reminded us through Marx, can then extract the true and do away with the false. This version of “the project” reduces the quest for liberation to a pure creative endeavour of the cultural agent, as Sharp clarifies as he makes the other quote:

“In the wake of the attack on institutions, which has brought to a head in Europe at least by the events in Paris in 1968, has been the growth of individualism and the almost frantic attempt to find new leaders. Spearheading a fight for identity a younger generation of politically conscious people (...) has brought about, through the techniques of confrontation, as eruption that seeks to threaten the basic structure of society as we know it today. «Revolutionary individualism» is the goal. One French critic writing on art and the May «revolution» put it this way:

«We shall only change the political horizon by ceasing to revolve around an authoritarian centre, we shall only come to sovereignty by refusing to delegate it to anyone at all and by living it with all our might and in all our actions. Nothing can stand against this necessity for a radical, total transformation of all the values of our culture.»

By the use of manifestoes, preparatory civil codes, information systems, and eventually a constitution, a kind of «counterstate» would be opened up. Once the state loses the «authority of knowledge», the argument continues, it would no longer monopolise the political and cultural arena.»²²⁸

The State to be attacked is no longer the bourgeois state, but the State in general. The enemy is no longer capitalism, but any forms of “authority”. The emerging counterstate is no longer the network of grassroots Soviets in which the working class organises its political awareness against the capitalist State and its institutions, but the network of free liberal intellectuals who vomit their creative juices on the masses from above, while presenting their digestion as a struggle from below. 1968 is reduced to a revolution of the middle classes, class antagonisms are a thing of the past, democracy has replaced capitalism, and cultural action is now the vehicle, the only vehicle, for a pseudo-political struggle that is naught but a radicalisation of the libertarian democratic principle against “institutions” as such. The same

²²⁸ Dennis SHARP, “Architecture and Politics”, Editorial, in *Architectural Association Quarterly* vol.4 nr.4 (Oct-Dec 1972), pp.3-4

conjuncture that made possible the identification of “the project” as a professional version of petty-bourgeois paternalistic ideology, also made necessary not its dissolution, but its reinforcement in transformation. The denunciation of “the project” would become a rhetorical tool for its shift from the particular to the general – from the specifically historical “modernist” version of it, the “ideology of the plan”, to an ideology of the supremacy of ideology itself, “the project” of “the project” in ultimate trans-historical generality.

“The avant-garde” reborn

In the post-1971 “free marketplace of ideas” the Architectural Association came to embody, control over the narrative of “the avant-garde” was fought over. Just as the emergent ideology of “post-modernism” was linking to a richer past in the service of a popular post-political present, a section of architectural ideologues were attempting to escape forward from the imminent collapse of “modernism” in the advent of the death of “the plan”. This attempt was led by Diploma Unit 9, that Elia Zenghelis takes from Leon Krier in 74-75 and which Rem Koolhaas joins in 75-76, who would come to elect the Soviet “avant-garde” as the prime material for the speculations of their students. Throughout the 70s, the Architectural Association was riddled with discussions on political engagement, much of it made in self-described Marxist terms, competing in the newly formed liberal market intellectual utopia. A *Marxist Studies Group* functioned for years every Thursday under Steve Gould, ran by the *Socialist Society*. Jonathan Schiffer gives an open seminar on Basic Marxism in the first term of 74. Diploma Unit 2, led by Bernard Tschumi, focuses on *Urban Politics*, leading under that title several lectures and events between 73 and 75. In June 74, an *Architects Revolutionary Council* is founded. Charles Jencks bases his history teaching on his liberal re-organisation of politics we have just examined all through the decade. In general terms, it could be said that the field of “the left” in architecture is being invented in the Architectural Association during the 70s, just as the field of “the left” is being configured in its contemporary liberal-bourgeois form at the same time in broad political thought.²²⁹

²²⁹ All these and the following events and dates are taken from the Architectural Association weekly Events Lists of those years, that began being published in 73 as a way to announce to the entire school community in a central location the diversity of happenings at the school following Boyarsky’s reform.

In the academic year 1973-74, Diploma units 1, 2, 3 and 9 organise a series of events under the title *Revolutionary Cultural Projects of the 20s and 30s*, of which *Russian Constructivism Part I* takes place in March the 11th and *Russian Constructivism Part II* on the 18th. In the following academic year of 74-75, Elia Zenghelis gives two lunchtime seminars on the *Social Condenser* in November the 25th and December the 2nd to both his Diploma Unit 9 and Tschumi's Unit 2. In October the 7th of 75, the exhibition *Recent Architecture in the USSR* opens, organised by the Building Centre with support by the British Council. An exhibition called *The Other Twenties*, on posters and graphics of "the avant-garde", opens in November the 9th of 75 in the AA members room, showing material from the USSR amidst that from France, England, Switzerland and the USA. Diploma Unit 9 organises the Malevich Group in the academic year 75-76, around a project on the sky/earth scraper, and Zenghelis repeats his seminar on the *Social Condenser* for Units 9 and 2 in that December the 2nd. This is the academic year when Zaha Hadid studies in Dip.9. The year 76-77 has Anatole Kopp give a lecture on his experience in urban planning in Algeria in November the 24th, meeting with Dip.9 in the same day, and giving a seminar and film showing on the documentary *Changer la Vie* on the Soviet 20s. Kopp returns to give a series of lectures on *Architecture and Liberty* in February, organised by the Architects Revolutionary Council – on the 16th, *People and Planning*, on the 17th, *Constructivism*. Dip.9 continues in 76-77 to function on the Soviet "avant-garde", organising two seminars on Leonidov in February the 24th and March the 10th. In 77-78, Catherine Cooke and Christina Lodder give a lecture series spanning the 2nd term titled *From the Laboratory out into Life: Russian Constructivism 1910-31*.²³⁰ Cooke would return in November the 17th of the following academic year to lecture on *Soviet Housing in the 20s: Politics, Finance and Form*. This is the year Dennis Sharp invites her to edit the special issue of *A.A.Q.* devoted to the Soviet "avant-garde", and after that she would spend the following decade doing the same in *A.D.* amidst Charles Jencks and Kenneth Frampton spreading the virtues of their "post-modernism" and "critical regionalism".

²³⁰ The first lecture takes place in January the 18th, on *Before 1914*, and is given by both. On the 25th, Lodder gives *From Artist to Artist-Constructor*. On February the 8th, the two give again a joint lecture on *Two Seminal Books*, these books being Alexei Gan's *Constructivism* and Ginzburg's *Style and Epoch*. On the 15th Cooke lectures on *Constructivism in Architecture: the Functional Method*, and on the 22nd on *Applications of the Functional Method*. On the 1st of March Lodder lectures on *The Final Stages of Artistic Constructivism* and finally, on the 8th, Cooke ends with *Settlement Planning: the Ultimate Synthesis*.

Koolhaas gives in February the 21st and 28th of 78 two lectures on *Irresistible Modern Architecture: The Architecture of Ivan Leonidov 1902-1959*, showcasing the work he had been doing with Gerrit Oorthuys on a book that was set to be published later that year on that last of “constructivist” architects. Oorthuys had been researching “constructivism” in Delft, and had lectured in 1970 on the relationships between Soviet and Dutch “constructivists” at the IUAV in Venice, being probably the source for Tafuri’s information later included as part of his 1971 text on the crisis of the “avant-garde” in realised socialism.²³¹ Their joint work had already been published in the second issue of 1974 of the journal *Oppositions* of the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in New York, an article titled *Ivan Leonidov’s Dom Narkomtyazhprom, Moscow*. Their monograph on *Ivan Leonidov* would be published in 1982, only in Dutch.

Koolhaas’ and Zenghelis’ tactic of escaping forward from “modernism” would come to take final control over the narrative of “the avant-garde”. Frampton’s “critical regionalism” was directed to more essentialist and conservative lefts, his *Modern Architecture: a Critical History* including the Soviet production in much the same way Jean-Louis Cohen would later do, albeit less extensively. Jenck’s “post-modernism” also eventually dispensed with the need for an “aura” of implicit politicality as its liberal populism became more and more explicitly consumer-ethics based. Conrad Jameson illustrates this quite clearly when he constructs in 1979 his series of lectures *Against Modern Architecture: Notes for a Counter-Revolution*, where he uses again the critique of “the project” as a tool for a counter-project against “the plan”. Part II of the lecture series is titled *The ABC of Modernist Self-Justification*, and is composed of three lectures: *A is for Avant-Garde*, in November the 7th, *B is for Baby-Logic* in the 14th, and *C is for Camouflage* in the 21st. As we can clearly see, “the avant-garde” as a category ends up associated with “modernism” by the enemies of “modernism”, but not before it had already been used through the 70s as a tool to excise “the plan” from a liberal version of “the project”. The new “avant-gardists” would construct themselves in opposition to the consumer ethics of the counter-revolution of “post-modernism” and to the soft-left *genius loci* of “critical regionalism”. They would successfully co-opt the “aura” of politics to their own ascending style, to the point the history of the Soviet “avant-garde” would grow to become self-conscious. Kenneth Powell, in the editorial for the 1995 Catherine Cooke-edited special issue on *The Avant-Garde: Russian Architecture in the Twenties*, finishes by commenting how:

²³¹ According to Roberto GARGIANI, *Rem Koolhaas / OMA*, EPFL Press and Routledge, Oxford, 2011, p.41

“An excessive concern with form and with theory in the current renaissance of Modernism can only result in an alien and negative preciousness (already apparent in American Deconstructivist circles). This is clearly a case of fighting Post-Modernism on the basis of its own set of rules – more or less inviting the conclusion that «Modernism is just another style». An aggressive, socially aware, artistically aligned modern architecture for the 21st century must be based on the rejection of applied style and a Constructivist contempt for applied effects.”²³²

Indeed, Powell’s concern for the ideological function of this “historiographical link” is laudable. In 1995, the new Anglo-American “avant-gardes” were already in full swing, using the Soviet “avant-garde” as their main lever. The 1988 MOMA exhibition on “deconstructivist” architecture – directed by the great depoliticiser Phillip Johnson who had neutered the debates of the 20s in architecture into the Anglo-American notion of an “International Style” that Jencks then combated – had posed the work of Soviet “constructivism” as a prolegomena to that of Coop Himmelblau, Peter Eisenman, Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas, Daniel Libeskind and Bernard Tschumi. In 1992 Zaha Hadid had directed the exhibition *The Great Utopia: the Russian and Soviet Avant-garde, 1915-1932* at the New York’s Guggenheim that this thesis started with, well on her way to the moment where she would place the Malevich of Unit 9 she had studied under as her direct precedent, in the 2010 exhibition *Zaha Hadid and Suprematism* at Galerie Gmurzynska in Zurich. Through the 90s, Patrick Schumacher was beginning to present her “parametricism” as the style of future communism, before he turned around and made it instead the style of a “radical free market urbanism” in the early 2010s.²³³

But Powell poses no real alternative. He looks for a purer application of the principles of “the avant-garde” in his moment. He is not aware that this purity cannot exist, that “the historiographical link” he feels and suspects is only possible because “the project” that takes hold of the present through historiographical narrative is but the migration of “the project” of the failed practice of the “avant-garde” to Western post-68 liberal academia. The anti-“post-modernism” of the new Western neo-modernist “avant-gardes” cannot be but what it is, and was so already since its 1970s inception. Koolhaas’ anti-“post-modernism” cannot be structurally

²³² Kenneth POWELL, “Modernism Divided”, in *Architectural Design* vol.61 nr.9-10 (1995), p.7

²³³ Patrick SCHUMAKER, *I Am Trying to Imagine a Radical Free Market Urbanism*, Conversation between Peter Eisenman and Patrik Schumacher, New York 2013, published in *Log* 28, Stocktaking, Summer 2013, Anyone Corporation. From:

<<http://www.patrikschumacher.com/Texts/Radical%20Free%20Market%20Urbanism.html>> consulted in 28/07/2017

dissimilar to Jencks' "post-modernism", it cannot challenge it on the basis of a different set of rules. For it cannot be but another effort, developed throughout the 70s and 80s, after "the avant-garde" had taken safe refuge from the "really existing plan" in the annals of Western liberal-bourgeois historiography, to bring it forth anew onto practice as the new "project" of liberal-bourgeois post-plan post-politics cultural politicality.

In 1978, the year Arthur Korn died, Diploma 9 unit master at the Architectural Association Rem Koolhaas published *Delirious New York* in the UK via Oxford University Press. This book is an ode to the modern capitalist really existing city, its all-consuming density, its all-encompassing plan. The book is charged with a metaphysical crypto-materialism, the modern capitalist city portrayed as the ultimate agent of capitalist subsumption, the grid absorbing all "projects" to engorge its really existing self. The "projects" always fail, to the extent that they represent themselves as a production of a future. But they always win as well, for they add to the actual reproduction of an eternal present. The book glorifies this process, relishing every "projects'" death. Let us be reminded of Lukács' words on Kafka:

*"Kafka (...) is an atheist. An atheist, though, of that modern species who regard God's removal from the scene not as a liberation (...) but as a token of the «God-forsakenness» of the world (...). Modern religious atheism is characterised, on the one hand, by the fact that unbelief has lost its revolutionary élan – the empty heavens are the projection of a world beyond hope of redemption. On the other hand, religious atheism shows that the desire for salvation lives on with undiminished force in a world without God, worshipping the void created by God's absence."*²³⁴

There is much of Kafka in Koolhaas. The death of "the project" itself becomes, through him, the new "project", the "project" of the void itself. Kafka took a masochistic pleasure in drowning in the process. Koolhaas takes the side of the process, and in doing so, imbues capitalist subsumption itself with the very "aura" all the failed "projects" claimed for themselves.

He ends the book with five little stories. Of these, the important ones are the first and the last. The first is called *The City of the Captive Globe*. We'll have to read most of it. It's very short. It goes like this:

²³⁴ Georg LUKÁCS, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, Merlin Press, London, 1972, p.44

“The city of the Captive Globe is devoted to the artificial conception and accelerated birth of theories, interpretations, mental constructions, proposals and their infliction on the World. It is the capital of Ego, where science, art, poetry and forms of madness compete under ideal conditions to invent, destroy and restore the world of phenomenal Reality. Each Science or Mania has its own plot. On each plot stands an identical base, built from heavy polished stone. To facilitate and provoke speculative activity, these bases – ideological laboratories, are equipped to suspend unwelcome laws, undeniable truths, to create nonexistent, physical conditions. From these solid blocks of granite, each philosophy has the right to expand indefinitely towards heaven. (...)

The changes in this ideological skyline will be rapid and continuous: a rich spectacle of ethical joy, moral fever or intellectual masturbation. The collapse of one of the towers can mean two things: failure, giving up, or a visual Eureka, a speculative ejaculation (...)

At these moments the purpose of the Captive Globe, suspended at the centre of the city, becomes apparent: all these Institutes together form an enormous incubator of the World itself; they are breeding on the Globe.

Through our feverish thinking in the Towers, the Globe gains weight. Its temperature rises slowly. In spite of the most humiliating setbacks, its ageless pregnancy survives.”²³⁵

The City of the Captive Globe is the city of “the project”. All projects fail, but succeed, for they keep the World going. And yet they lock it in. It’s the really existing utopia of the intellectual petty-bourgeoisie. The location of the process of the eternal “project” that does not produce, but reproduces, that is the very agent of reproduction of capitalist subsumption. Architecture as “project” achieves here its last form, a formal metaphor for the ideology of the liberal intellectual. This is a critique of “the project” made from within. There is no external reality, and the intellectual petty-bourgeoisie, in its inherent masturbatory disposition, maintains its role as conceiver of the future. In Koolhaas’ poetic self-awareness, “the project” reaches the apex of cynicism – it realises that it survives in its multiple dying, each life and each death in servitude to the bourgeois end of history.

And yet there is a glimmer of hope.

²³⁵ Rem KOOLHAAS, “The City of the Captive Globe”, in *Delirious New York*, The Monacelli Press, New York, 1994, p.294

The last story is called *The Story of the Pool*. It's a bit longer, we won't transcribe it. It's the story of a group of "constructivist" architects who, in 1923 in Moscow, built, as an academic project, a pool. The pool was a floating object, a metal box that did not sink.

*"One day they discovered that if they swam in unison – in regular synchronised laps from one end of the pool to the other – the pool would begin to move slowly in the opposite direction. They were amazed at this involuntary locomotion; actually, it was explained by a simple law of physics: action = reaction."*²³⁶

In the 30s, the "constructivists" who had built the pool decided to use its locomotive capacities to escape from "Stalinism". All they had to do to reach Manhattan was to swim with all their might towards the Kremlin. And so they did, and reached their goal, in 1976, and they didn't like it either. And New York didn't like them back, for "modernism" was out of fashion in there too like it was in 30s Moscow:

"They were all against Modernism now: ignoring the spectacular decline of their profession, their own increasingly pathetic irrelevance, their desperate production of flaccid country mansions, the limp suspense of their trite complexities, the dry taste of their fabricated poetry, the agonies of their irrelevant sophistication, they complained that the pool was so bland, so rectilinear, so unadventurous, so boring; there were no historical allusions; there was no decoration; there was no ... shear, no tension, no wit – only straight lines, right angles and the drab color of rust. (in its ruthless simplicity, the pool threatened them – like a thermometer that might be inserted in their projects to take the temperature of their decadence.)

*Still, to have Constructivism over with, the New Yorkers decided to give their so-called colleagues a collective medal at a discreet waterside ceremony. (...) The medal had an old inscription from the thirties (...). It was by now irrelevant (...). It said, «THERE IS NO EASY WAY FROM THE EARTH TO THE STARS.» Looking at the starry sky reflected in the narrow rectangle of their pool, one architect/lifeguard, still dripping wet from the last lap, answered for all of them: «We just went from Moscow to New York....» Then they dove into the water to assume their familiar formation."*²³⁷

Koolhaas is quite a bit more judgemental of the "projects" of his time in this story. Almost as if he is scared of "the project" failing altogether, so useless are the multiple versions of it the capitalist city is now filled with. As if the captive Globe was in danger of going dry

²³⁶ Rem KOOLHAAS, "The Story of the Pool", in *Delirious New York*, The Monacelli Press, New York, 1994, p.307

²³⁷ Rem KOOLHAAS, "The Story of the Pool", in *Delirious New York*, The Monacelli Press, New York, 1994, p.310

from the impotent exertions of the post-68 liberal *intelligentsia*. It might even break free from its captivity, leave behind the capital of petty-bourgeois Ego, and find a new life for itself outside the boundaries of its ideology. This could not be. Koolhaas is a cynic, but even he cannot escape ideology. If “the project” is extant, a new “project” is needed. And here comes this “constructivist” raft, isolated from its Soviet history, to wash ashore in the capital of the Empire. As it docks, that capital patronises it, and pushes it away. The “constructivist” raft, that Letatlin of the seas, keeps moving toward the stars, the optimism of its “project” frozen in the Atlantic like that of Daniel Wollin had been frozen in Siberia. And as it now moves in the waters of the Hudson, it inevitably changes Manhattan, even against its will, and rescues its stranglehold on the Globe.

“In front of Welfare Palace Hotel, the raft of the Constructivists collides with the raft of the Medusa: optimist vs. pessimism.

The steel of the pool slices through the plastic of the sculpture like a knife through butter.”²³⁸

This is a redemptory cut. What is sliced away are the sins of the present. The pool is a man-made lake of clean, clear water:

“almost invisible – practically submerged in the pollution of the East River”²³⁹

Koolhaas talks about himself, even if he doesn’t know it. In the struggle he describes between Western decadence and “constructivist” optimism, he places himself on the side of the latter. But unbeknownst to him (or not, one is wise not to underestimate his cynicism) he is the very Western architect patronising the “constructivists”, precisely as he writes this text. He is the one putting that medal around their necks, like a noose. He supports the “constructivists”, in the words of Lenin, *“like the rope supports the hanged man”*.²⁴⁰

In joining the “constructivist” raft, plunging into the pool, the architecture of the prodigal West is cleansed in its purity. It is reinvigorated to swim again, to keep on breeding on the Globe. As “the project” of the West subsumes “the project” of the Soviet “avant-garde”, it reinvents itself. The architectural formal subsumption of socialist history feeds the real

²³⁸ Rem KOOLHAAS, “The Story of the Pool”, in *Delirious New York*, The Monacelli Press, New York, 1994, p.310

²³⁹ Rem KOOLHAAS, “The Story of the Pool”, in *Delirious New York*, The Monacelli Press, New York, 1994, p.308

²⁴⁰ Lenin states this is how a British Communist Party should support the Labour party in the 1920s, in *Left Wing Communism: an Infantile Disorder*.

subsumption of the special “quality” of intellectual labour.²⁴¹ “The project” is born anew, as the ideological vanguard of the new neoliberal stage of capitalism.

Yet, were the technical expertise of Koolhaas, or of the “constructivists”, a bit better, they would have noticed a crucial flaw in their plan to save the capitalist city. For the pool does not work. As the “constructivists” swam from the New York end of the pool towards the Moscow end, the pool indeed moves towards New York. But for that to happen, they must actually move in the pool. They must actually start on one end and reach the other, for the pool is finite. And when they reach the Moscow end, they must either swim back, or pull up and walk around the edge to the New York end to then plunge into the pool to swim again. And this countermovement negates the movement that swimming towards Moscow had effected in the first place. The “constructivists” believed they were moving forward towards New York by swimming backwards towards Moscow. Their frail, amateurish, unscientific grasp on the laws of material reality made them miss how their self-contained little “avant-garde” tank did not work as they thought it did at all. All that time, they were just drifting, and if they landed in New York, it was a purely serendipitous event, brought about not by design, but by the currents of history. To move where they want to go, the architects have to, upon reaching the back end of the pool, pull up and jump out of the pool, into the murky, polluted waters of the really existing sea, and there, amidst the waves and the sharks, swim around the box of the pool, to only then pull themselves back onto it on the forward end, purged of the mythology of their own self-contained cleanliness.

²⁴¹ On formal and real subsumption, read Karl MARX, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Chapter III, in the *Economic Manuscripts of 1861-64*.

Part Four

Epilogue

1 – Positive in Form, Negative in Content, and the Meaning of Contemporary Formalism

The really-existing conditions

In 2012, the year I began this work, as the thesis mentioned at the beginning of Part II, the Soviet “avant-garde” had a particularly noticeable presence in London. At that time, the ideological role of the Western historiography of Soviet architecture was being made quite clear and explicit. From the rigorous, but ultimately non-challenging scholarship of Jean-Louis Cohen on top of Richard Pare’s photographic nostalgia of the lost “avant-garde”, to the self-congratulatory historical fictions of Stefan Heym and Zaha Hadid, one could sense at skin level the problematic nature of what I would come to call “the historiographical link”. If, as this thesis would come to state, the conventional narrative had been serving as a tool for the consolidation of a liberal-bourgeois ideology in cultural studies and politics, after the 60s effective demise of class politics in Europe, then in 2012 this ideological framework was dominant to the point where its agents could play free and loose with the material in ways that seemed to me so obviously obscene that they were downright funny. Of course, as work on the thesis progressed, I realised that this amusing perversion was structural to the entirety of the historical development of the historiography, particularly in the London of the 1970s, and especially in the very school in which I was basing my work – a school which ideological quirks and functions I was also getting to know at the same time. That the amusement I felt in 2012 was extended over time to the general body of serious scholarly work on the topic as well – often by very knowledgeable authors whose competence as historians I cannot begin to approach – could be seen as one of the perks of having produced this work. Serious critique of ideology seems to almost inevitably produce as a by-product a certain degree of cynical amusement, probably since its very inception – I can picture Marx smirking as he wrote *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, and in recent years Slavoj Žižek seems to have fused his own culturalist brand of critique of ideology with the tradition of stand-up comedy. But being a red card-bearing, militant political activist in the old style – a style still quite operative in my native country – as well as a petty-bourgeois intellectual, I cannot help but feel together with the cynical amusement a significant sense of historical tragedy in the making. Marx certainly wasn’t smirking on hearing of the events of the Paris Commune.

As my cynical petty-bourgeois eyes delighted in the self-congratulatory first-World liberal nonsense of 2012 London, my Marxist communist nose felt at the same time the smell of gunpowder. This was felt of course at several levels at the same time – economical, political,

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cultural. While many in my party had accurately predicted the 2007 crash several years in advance, the feeling of imminent economic collapse is now more continuous and less precise. This is, of course, because the crash is ongoing and being managed as such, since the central banks of the first World decided to forgo their own strict ideologies of small-government and deficit-control and began printing currency in the billions every year to hand out to a financial sector that breathes still only in the measure that it is intra-venally linked to state life-support. That this is not sustainable becomes evident as I realised my rent had gone up by 20% in four years, and I learned that housing inflation in London remained until this year at an average above 10% per year since 2012 in what was undoubtedly the biggest financial bubble in history. That the attempts to manage the burst are doomed to fail is evident, and what we instead have been seeing is an almost tactile feeling of disjunction, amongst the popular classes, between an “Obama-effect” rhetoric of liberal progress and the spiralling reality of austerity and social-economic collapse.

I could not have foreseen in 2012 that by 2017, when I would be finishing my thesis, by a convoluted irony of historical fate, liberal-bourgeois ideology and politics would globally implode on the one hundredth anniversary of the Soviet revolution. Today we witness a contradictory entrenchment of liberal-bourgeois ideology in the political discourse of the currently dissolving version of the capitalist global regime. The re-emergence of class politics comes subsumed under a reactionary layer of cultural politics, in working-class reaction to the skin-deep progressive cultural politics of a liberal left that is in voluntary thrall of the gospel of the free market. This terminally ill liberal left, infected to the marrow with Western exceptionalism and middle-class privilege, doubles down, from the heights of its feeling of absolute moral superiority, on its own “project” of cultural politics, and increasingly rejects class politics on the very basis that it comes often co-opted by the cultural “project” of the conservative right – with the next logical step being the explicit hatred it often shows for the working class, the unwashed masses of the “basket of deplorables”. And in ultimate historical irony, as replacement for the traditional right-conservative scapegoating of immigrants or Islam as the external enemies on which the subjectivity of the masses must be focused instead of on the internal contradictions of the system, this liberal left now resuscitates, as the external source of the problem, the fabricated tale of a resurgent tyrannical and imperialistic Russia.

In 2017 in this context, where political lines are re-drawn and redefined, we witness at the same time a particularly pungent revival of the conventioned tale of the Soviet “avant-garde” in liberal celebration of the cultural conquests of October. If in 2012 this was amusing, against the backdrop of 2017 it is somewhere in-between sad and downright hysterical. That the liberal “project” of the neo-liberal stage of capitalism has been stretching its contradictions to the brink

of rupture has become quite evident in the *milieus* of London architectural education. Teaching at the AA over the period of a mere three years has been enough to realise that the dominant ideology under which first world architecture still presents its identity to the global marketplace of ideas is changing rapidly. The perceived “formalism” of its currently dissolving version is under increasing suspicion, and both teachers and students move away from the futuristic fanciful gestures of liberal artistic freedom to new versions of “the project” that are grounded on discourses of social engagement. The old order dies, somewhat fatefully in cases. Schumacher, the droppings left behind by the old dying system, sensing he is about to be swept away into the trashcan of History, tries to make himself again the talk of the town by committing the structural honesty of, even before being finally committed to the eternal oblivion of the bin, openly starting to smell like it.

Challenging discourses rise, carrying their own dangers, and ultimately powerless, but carrying also, amidst the false consciousness of their “projects”, parts of the truth of what must be the quest for an alternative. These invariably reintroduce the “ideology of the plan” into what has become since the 80s merely “the project” of “the project”. “Projects” such as that of Pier Vittorio Aureli inject an invigorating radicality of discipline and commitment, cracking splits in the dominant “aura” of liberal self-satisfaction that are simultaneously appealing and scary to the new generations of students and teachers. His critique of liberalism, and the way he carves a path for political engagement through the vines of middle-class empty formal masturbation, opens a field of critique within which this thesis itself becomes possible. And yet, his own ideology of the intrinsic politicality of “form” does not structurally escape the established condition of “avant-garde” thought, and the reactionary perils of this 21st century architectural version of what Marx and Engels called “feudal socialism” are felt, not in him, but in some of his less disciplined, less committed, more liberal followers, whose discourses increasingly begin to take explicit quasi-fascistic qualities.

More appealing and less scary to the new generations, because less structurally challenging, are a plethora of discourses and quasi-practices that emerge riding the wave of a nostalgia for what is mostly a neo-liberal interpretation of Keynesian politics. This is the philosophy behind both the latest Pritzker Prize and the latest Venice Biennale. Self-proclaimed new “engaged generations”, of which the loudest London con-artist is probably Jack Self, redesign the formula of the liberal interpretation of “the avant-garde”, attempting to weave a logic of local intervention, presented as socially aware, within the existing structures of financial domination of the most parasitic rentist capitalism. These are almost always the refurbishment of established gentrifying practices through the introduction of discursive leftist clichés bereft of content, the scale of the local naught but the expression of the collapse of the

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capacity of real-estate investment in the era when the bailouts of corporate welfare have rendered finance largely independent from the housing credit market that had been till 2007 its central pillar. That these discourses make the explicit case for the need to peddle the idea of socially aware architecture to capitalist investors, at the same time they champion tired formulas of self-promotion and self-building, in the face of an accepted-as-fact notion of the historical impossibility of the return of state investment – or in other words of “the plan” – is intrinsically linked to the character of their projects as nothing more than middle class utopias where the contemporary objective social-economic status of the working class is entirely besides the point. And yet, even these desperate liberal, usually neo-modernistic follies, in their relative indifference to the problem of “form” and their emphasis on capitalism-as-condition, carry usefulness in the return of the notion of on-the-ground engagement with concrete conditions, often in the form of a newfound professional interest in themes around social housing.

It is generally within this latest type of discourse that the more up-to-date doses of Soviet “avant-garde” appear. One relatively widespread phenomenon, that this thesis left entirely out, is an interest in post-Khrushchovite Soviet “brutalism”, part of a wider revival in mainstream architectural taste of late-modernism. While I have not looked into these discourses with any systematic degree, it is hard not to intuit in them an injection of a revolutionary “aura”, via the Soviet examples, into the Western style of the architecture of the era of Keynesian planning – which is entirely understandable at a time when moderate social-democratic promises like those embodied by Jeremy Corbin, Bernie Sanders or Jean-Luc Mélenchon are so outlandish to the mainstream liberal realm of political possibilities as to appear revolutionary, regardless of their impotence upon reaching political power when facing up to the transnational state structures of the current neo-liberal stage of capitalism, as has been clearly shown in the Greek case. This taste for welfare state forms, however, remains in the minority compared to the renewed fascination with the period of “the avant-garde”, and rightly so – for how could the dominant ideology in the discipline retain its petty-bourgeois notions of cultural leadership were the “really existing plan” to return? Not only has past experience shown that the actual development of “the plan” sidelines the primacy of cultural agency, but also the immediate emphasis on politics and economics that this train of thought implies challenges the already contracting position of the architect on a very short term. Thus architects still prefer, over the architecturalisation of “the plan”, to pursue what could be described as “projects” of cultural resistance – a resistance always made in two directions, simultaneously against the neo-liberal politics of current capitalism, and against politics *tout-court*, against the realisation that political action, not cultural reaction, is the operative method of struggle.

And so the Soviet “avant-garde” fits still today like a glove on the ideological hands of Western cultural intelligentsia, no longer in the period of its post-plan rise, but in that of its fall. In 2017 a myriad of exhibitions and events blitzed the London cultural scene with straightforward and especially naïve versions of the established historiographical narrative, proving that this city is still at the forefront of the liberal co-option of the revolutionary experience. And in these events we see the “project” of cultural politics operating as the liberal-bourgeois alternative to class politics, through historiography in architectural discourse. As a single example, I will quote the description for an event in the Royal Academy of Arts in London this past April, part of a series on the Soviet “avant-garde”. The text says:

“Byt” is a Russian term that encompasses daily life, domesticity and lifestyle. After the revolution of 1917, architecture had to create the material conditions that would lead to the new ‘socialist’ individual and corresponding “byt”. The term therefore carries the ambition of utopian projects of the past and invites us to consider how contemporary architecture can serve, or indeed facilitate, a way of life for our time.

In post-revolution Russia, communal housing was the primary mechanism to create a truly collective society and eliminate the bourgeois domestic sphere. (...)

(...) There are many who see communal living or co-living as the ideal solution to the housing crisis, regarding a communal lifestyle as socially beneficial, sustainable and economically viable. The idea of pooling funds, space and resources for greater shared gains is becoming increasingly enticing and many are willing to give up on privacy to achieve these benefits.”²⁴²

We see here how the Russian concept of “byt”, historiographically imbued with revolutionary potential, morphs into a synonym for an Agambenian “form of life” which enables a form of cultural resistance to the economic tragedy of neo-liberal capitalism and its crisis.²⁴³ This resistance embraces the scarcity created by the crisis of the profit margins and fetishises its social consequences, presenting poverty and overcrowding as progressive

²⁴² Introductory text to *A New Communal: Быт – way of life*, an event at the Royal Academy of Arts programmed for 10 April 2017. From: <<https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/event/a-new-communal>> consulted in 31 Dec 2016

²⁴³ “Byt” has become a somewhat trendy concept through which to look at the cultural history of the Soviet Union for the past couple of decades. It provides a framework of “Russianness” that favours perceiving class warfare during the revolution as a sort of revolutionary cultural war to destroy old bourgeois “forms of life” and construct a socialist “identity”. See, for an early example:

Irina GUTKIN, *The Cultural Origins of the Socialist Realist Aesthetic: 1890-1934*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston Illinois, 1999

opportunities. So the explicit politicisation of the Soviet “avant-garde” becomes an ideological facilitator for a pseudo-leftist architectural cultural “project” of what I would call neo-liberal communalism. I’d also add as an aside that this method of achieving a certain kind of metaphysical “meaning” in architectural discourse is a sort of inverse Heideggerian proposal – substitute a German word-to-meaning relationship with a Russian one, and the idealist, essentialist metaphysics are now suddenly revolutionary instead of reactionary.

“The project” itself reaches its final form in this way. From a cultural “project” that aimed at expressing and, in so doing, replacing political praxis, it becomes in the present a redemptory rhetoric that imbues with an “aura” of revolutionary politicality practices that would by the standards of most of the historical agents of “the avant-garde” be called formalistic and therefore, reactionary. The “project” of the “the avant-garde” past, pregnant with the spectre of communism, is historiographically brought back to redeem “the avant-garde” present from the sins of its really existing “formalism”.

Formalisms

There is a final sequence of ideas that, because they exist more at the level of alternative historiographical interpretation than at that of a critique of historiography-as-ideology, I left mostly out of the main body of the thesis, but that I nevertheless feel I should produce here in this epilogue. The production of new revised narratives, more or less grounded in new empirical research, and that may or may not be freer from the contemporary ideological gridlocks that this thesis diagnoses, is best left for historians who have the full set of skills to do them properly, and they are not me. Here at the epilogue, however, I am more comfortable in presenting a few guesses on what consequences this meta-historiographical examination can have at the level of historiographical work itself, for those guesses do pop up almost inevitably from the meta-historiographical critique, and I feel that this is the place where they can be identified without necessarily feeling pressured to fully guard them in an unassailable argumentative fortress grounded in solid evidence.

To introduce this sequence of ideas, the reader will have to forgive me for again resorting to that most unfashionable of references, Georg Lukács. At the start of the first chapter of the already quoted *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, a chapter called *The Ideology of Modernism*, Lukács states:

“What must be avoided at all costs is the approach generally adopted by bourgeois-modernist critics themselves: that exaggerated concern with formal criteria, with questions of style and literary technique. This approach may appear to distinguish sharply between «modernist» and

«traditional» writing (i.e. contemporary writers who adhere to the styles of the last century). In fact it fails to locate the decisive formal problems and turns a blind eye to their inherent dialectic. We are presented with a false polarisation which, by exaggerating the importance of stylistic differences, conceals the opposing principles actually underlying and determining contrasting styles.»²⁴⁴

Lukács is here introducing the problem of “formalism”, but not simply as a debate between what is and isn’t formalist. Instead, the problem is placed on what ultimately become two diverging understandings of the category, conditioned by diverging ways of reading formal decisions and their content-level consequences. Lukács goes on to defend that the “bourgeois-modernist” privileging of literary form as vehicle for the representation of human subjectivity in relation to the world has effectively a conservative, mimetic, and naturalist content in the way it produces an essentialised, a-historical portrait of human subjectivity, in relation with a similarly static image of an incomprehensible, unreachable world. “Modernist” forms would then take nihilistic pleasure in the inherent inhumanity of the condition of modernity itself, adopting a simultaneously celebratory and reactionary attitude towards it. And naturally, Lukács then presents the tradition of “realism”, coming from bourgeois “critical-realism” into “socialist-realism”, as being, while more conservative in regards to literary technique, more progressive in content, in the way it constructs generalisations that would reveal the existing changing structures of the world and the human subject in dialectic relation to it.

This is not to take a stance on such literary debate, but to make a case for the problem, unaddressed in the architectural debate at an equivalently explicit level, of the diverging understandings of the category of “formalism”, a divergence that was hinted at in the first chapter of Part III, but not explored there. According to Lukács, “modernism” is “formalist”, not because it privileges “form” over “content”, but because it oversimplifies the functions of “form”, failing to understand that which he believes are the content-level consequences of the actually structural formal decisions, which give a specific “form” to the representation of reality. The “formalism” of “modernism” exists against “realism”, because the really-existing structures of reality are excluded, and reality is represented statically in an excessively empiricist, and one could add, inevitably formalised way. “Form” is not just the vehicle for “content”. “Form” exists as “content”, inasmuch as the perception of reality never goes past its

²⁴⁴ Georg LUKÁCS, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, Merlin Press, London, 1972, p.17

ghostly shades, its superficial “forms” perceived by the scared, immutable, and insurmountably isolated human subject. Against this, “realism” presents reality in its real changing structures, perceived through the agency of a dialectically active human subject, who becomes a subject precisely through that agency.

It is relatively clear that the category of “formalism” in the Soviet architectural debate, and the architectural debate in general as it evolves over the category of “the avant-garde”, also cannot be taken as fixed, but that it too must be seen always as existing in this set of relationships. In the beginning of Part Three, the thesis raised the issue of “formalism” explicitly through its discursive associations in the architectural debate of the Khrushchovite reforms. It there mentioned that two significations of the term were possible, and that the evolution of the historical debate in Soviet architecture since the time of “the avant-garde” could be seen as a debate between these two understandings of the category, defined there by its opposites: the opposite of “functionalism”, and the opposite of “realism”. The thesis did not expand on this distinction, for the reasons I just mentioned – I tried to keep the thesis away from making its own historiographical interpretations of “what really happened”.

The thesis did make over the course of Part Three several points that lead to a clarification of what the distinction between the two “formalisms” could mean, particularly as it examined the contradictions between the still established grand narrative, hailing all the way from Kopp, and the new empirically focused researches in which somehow that narrative still survives. There the thesis looked, mostly through Heather D. Dehaan’s research as a representative of the wider body of works in the field of social history, at the imminently practical difficulties of the 1930s implementations of the architectural policies of “the avant-garde” in real planning. The “social condenser” approach of constructivist discourse, even if applied by young VOPRA members, did not there emerge as being optimally suited, in that specific conjuncture, to “soviets and electrification”.

Here emerges also what may be another flaw of the thesis, and again one conditioned by its reluctance to go into the production of an alternative historiographical narrative. The thesis spends almost all of its time identifying the false consciousness of the ideology of “the avant-garde”, exposing its historical untruths, as they are conserved in a historiographical pickle for posterior Western consumption. But it spends almost no time identifying the historical truths in the same ideology, which is especially unfortunate given that the thesis places at the foundation of the ideology of the Western post-modern architectural historian, in the figure of its greatest ideologue Manfredo Tafuri, an overly simplistic understanding of the very concept of “ideology”, which is overly simplistic precisely in the way it fails to perceive the critique of ideology not only as a denunciation of untruths, but also as a theoretical extraction and,

therefore, production of the truths ideology carries within itself. The thesis' reluctance to engage in "truth extraction" is noticeable at this point, for the Avtozavod factory complex was indeed built and functioned, and not only that, the broad principles of modernist planning of "the avant-garde" ended up being implemented, if in a transformed fashion, after the historical process of revolutionary planning excised from "the avant-garde" proposal the false ideological elements.

These transformations that the history of the Soviet Union would see operate on the proposals of the architectural "avant-garde", these contradictions of "socialist-realism", are the very same ones we observed at the very start of this thesis on the formal characteristics of the Stalinallee – Stefan Heym's World Peace Road – and over the apparent incapability of the Western liberal mind to register the, in Lukács' terms, "*decisive formal problems*" of its design – precisely the same incapability Lukács identifies in "modernist" literary critics. To a certain extent, even Dehaan's decision to end the chapter on the Avtozavod factory complex on the failure of the plan, to then continue her book focused on the combat between "constructivist" and "social-realist" planning principles in the main city of Gorkii, shows in and of itself a historiographical bias that forces the historian to look away precisely at that which is most interesting is happening: how the Avtozavod factory complex effectively succeeds, for what was defeated in the period covered between 1930 and 1932 was "avant-garde thought", and not what in architecture would generally be called "modernist" planning. Indeed, the Avtozavod factory complex, as indeed the totality of urban and industrial developments in the first three Soviet five-year plans, and in the post war period as well, should be read as probably the greatest triumph of "modernist" planning in the history of the 20th century, reshaping a territory between Minsk and Vladivostok towards industrialisation, modernisation and urbanisation, through the application of a genericising and universalising principle at a scale not seen in the West possibly since the formation of the Roman Empire. Realising that this principle was, in general architectural terms, "modernism", requires the historian to cast out the dominant categorical opposition between "the avant-garde" and "Stalinism", an opposition that prevents the architecture of "Stalinism" to be perceived through what are, historically, its "*decisive formal problems*". The spot where these problems must be found is at the shift between the scale of the building, and the scale of the urban plan. To look at how the relations between these two scales is understood in the context of the dominant macro-historical narrative, and how this understanding carries an ideological kernel that is ultimately expressive of the political critique of "avant-garde" thought this entire thesis has built, I'll now have to do a completely different type of analysis of some of the same books the thesis has already gone through – I will judge the books not by the ideology implicit in the contradictions of the discourse, but by the discourse implicit in the choice of illustrations.

One of the more interesting contradictions of that most foundational of narratives that is Kopp's is that, despite his first book being called *Ville et Révolution*, there are very few urban plans in it. This is compounded in his later *L'Architecture de la Période Stalinienne*. A few plans do show up in the first 67 book – a couple of schemas for disurbanist proposals, a zoning plan by Ernst May for Magnitogorsk, and the 1935 Plan of Moscow. But mostly, the *ville* part of the *révolution* appears as principle carried within the architectural projects for buildings, and within the discourses. In the narrative, there is no distance between the “avant-garde” architectural options of the “constructivists” and the urban ones that are defined by Ginzburg's “disurbanism”, and the defeat of “constructivism” is the return to classical forms in architecture, to traditional forms in urban planning, and to a new autocracy in politics. So when the Moscow plan shows up, it's to illustrate the return to a radial concentric structure, in line with the “Stalinist” cultural counter-revolution, even if it represents technical progresses as well. This argument continues in the later 78 book, where apart from Ginzburg and Barchtch's “disurbanist” plan for Moscow, only three “Stalinist” plans of urban areas are shown in a single page, none of them identified, though one is immediately recognisable as the Leninskii Prospect in Moscow (Img.5). The drawings are described as examples of plans from between 35-55, and here we immediately recognise a historiographical problem of periodisation – if that is the period defined as “Stalinist” in urban planning, it is very hard to perceive it as a stable period through which planning practices remained largely the same. This is the period of the pre-war five-year plans, and of the post-war reconstruction. These two moments had significantly different priorities at the level of planning policy, but that cannot be grasped from Kopp. What is more remarkable, however, is that it also cannot be grasped from pretty much any other author that covers the architectural history of the period. “Stalinist” architecture appears systematically as opposed to “the 20s”, and at the culmination of every volume that tells of “the avant-garde”, with whatever terminology, Iofan's Palace of the Soviets punctuates the story like an iron boot. The historiography of “socialist-realist” architecture is made of monuments, well defined compositions contained in their architectural objectualness. It is somewhat paradoxical that in its “totalitarianism”, it seems almost timid in comparison to the broad strokes with which “the avant-garde” painted the entire territory. When urban images exist, they are aerial views focused on a particular monumental complex, almost always from the pre-war period, and there they do have similarities to Speer's drawings – the most richly illustrated volume on “Stalinist architecture”, Tarkhanov and Kavtaradze's book with this exact title, is filled with such drawings (Img.6). Even Paperny doesn't escape this rule, nor do the more interesting articles on “socialist-realism” by Starr and Cooke in English journals. In general, the history of architecture as also a history of urban planning disappears after the radical ideas of “the avant-garde” leave

the scene. What remains is monumental buildings and, at best, monumental bits of urban form. “The avant-garde” is defeated in 34 by Iofan, and “Stalinist” architecture remains Iofan till the end. The pages of history books are given the rhythm of the space between columns.

This of course would be entirely fine if that was indeed the history of urban planning between 35 and 55. “Stalinist” architecture then would indeed have been naught but the representation of a specific cultural framework, and all possible disagreements about it would then be limited to different ways to interpret that framework. In such historiographical frame of mind, Paperny’s and Groys’ would indeed be the most radical possible challenges of the established liberal, self-satisfied, pro-“avant-garde” narrative. But this is not the case, and this can be ascertained relatively quickly from between the lines of the dominant historiography. The simple fact that the Palace of the Soviets was left unbuilt, at the same time the Soviet Union was heavily industrialised, should be a clear reminder that the materialisation of such monumental images was not that high up on the list of priorities of the ruling forces. One little, extremely recent publication shows it, in the most unassuming of fashions. In Richard Anderson’s *Russia* published in 2015 in the UK, one finds a thorough compendium of the history of architecture in Russia from the end of the 19th century until the end of the 20th. This is not a book attempting a radical critique of the existing historiography, or indeed a critique altogether. It’s just a placid presentation of a history, in a style reminiscent of Jean-Louis Cohen’s attempts, that just so happens to include a description of the vast programmes of construction during the Stalin period, and shows a few examples of them (Img.7-8). And suddenly, the notion that “Stalinist” architecture was a period of objects comes crashing down, and we are forced to produce a finer reading of the period.

I would hazard, from my position of informed ignorance, proposing two basic historiographical distinctions. The first is a matter of periodisation – the pre-war and post-war periods do not have the same characteristics. The second is defined in space, in the territory, within the pre-war period – the distinction between designs for existing national or regional capitals, and those for industrial new towns. These two distinctions are defined in great measure in accordance to the economic priorities of Soviet planning. They therefore happen to coincide with the instances where actual building took place. The first three five-years plans prioritised industrial development in a decentralised fashion in the national territory. This is the period during which all those drawings for monumental complexes in the centre of existing capitals were made, all of them extremely conservative at the level of urban form, maintaining the structure of city blocks that came from the bourgeois city determined by private property of the land. None of these was built. What was being built at the time were the new towns, at a massive scale, and in these, what we see is the early version of what would become the standard

urban type of “socialist-realism” – independent, free-standing housing blocks in the “modernist” style, arranged within a grid of streets in a continuous public space always represented as green, aligned with the major streets so as to maintain the convention of monumental avenues, while at the same time dissolving the rigid traditional structure of city blocks. Often, the layout of these plans resembles Corbusian *redents*. After the war, the reconstruction and expansion of the major cities would generally follow this same approach, completely discarding the urban conservatism of the monumental drawings of the late 30s, but keeping much of the architecture. In short, while the eclecticism of “socialist-realist” architecture cannot be denied at the scale of the architecture, and while the staunch “urbanism” of its policies and denial of the “disurbanist” proposals is obvious at the grand scale of the territory, at the middle scale of urban design it’s hard not to see the “Stalinist” period as the application of some of the fundamental principles of the Athens Charter at an unparalleled scale, only surpassed, also in the Soviet Union, by the post-“Stalinist” period.

If one would accept this proposition, then the entire reading of the “end line” of “the avant-garde” becomes problematic too. If it is possible to look at the architecture of “Stalinism” as, essentially, “Athens Charter with avenues and columns”, which is ultimately what the thesis proposed, with help from Maria Giudici, at its very start in relation to the Stalinallee, then the “socialist-realist” rejection of “constructivism” was not so total after all, and the accusation of “formalism” it routinely launched at “the avant-garde” is not so different from the accusation of “formalism” the “constructivists” launched at ASNOVA and its members. The difference between the “end line” that historiographically defines the very broad category of “the avant-garde”, and the secondary “middle-lines” that are perceived within it, becomes blurred. Why is the VOPRA critique of OSA so fundamentally different from OSA’s critique of ASNOVA? Why is Mordvinov’s assault on *the Leonidoverie and its flaws* in Nr.12 of *Iskusstvo v Massy* of 1929 so qualitatively different from Ginzburg’s several denunciations of those before him?

Obviously there is an argument to be made for disciplinary specificity – architects and architectural historians don’t really pay the same amount of attention to urban planning as they do to architecture-as-buildings. But that is, in many ways, part of the point. The historical definition of that disciplinary specificity must be understood as intrinsically connected to the disciplinary ideology of architecture inasmuch as it is a professionally partial manifestation of the petty-bourgeois ideology of the liberal intellectual class, preserving the aura of the special quality of intellectual labour by means of the cultural “project”. Urban planning is left out of the picture precisely in the measure that it defines the really-existing conditions, and the really-existing practices. The urban images included are the progressive flights of fancy of “the avant-garde”, and the conservative flights of fancy of “socialist-realist” architects in the late 30s, both

discarded by the actual, truly progressive, historical development of urban practices in the Soviet Union in the Stalin years and afterwards. The progress of Soviet architecture then must be seen as a continued critique of “formalism”, not as it opposes “functionalism”, but as it opposes “realism”. “Constructivism” and its “functional method” were a step forward in this continuous critique, submitting architecture to the imperative of its social consequences. But inasmuch as it still gave architecture an excessive degree of agency, via the cultural “project” of collectivisation, it formalised function itself. Its culturalism then would be left behind by the evolution of real events. This is one of the major advantages of Dehaan’s book that this thesis used in Part III – it shows the defeat of “the avant-garde” happening not in Moscow in the competition for the Palace of the Soviets between 32 and 34, but in the construction of the new industrial towns between 30 and 32. It allows the movement from the centre to the periphery, from the architectural object to the urban plan, and from cultural expression to economical implementation. When we realise that the implementation of the economic plan followed, in many ways, what in architecture would be called “modernist” principles, the defeat of “the avant-garde” is also revealed to be not really total. “Avant-garde” thought, its culturalism, was indeed defeated, but the agents of “the avant-garde” did make crucial contributions for what the urban form of “Stalinism”, and “really-existing socialism” in general, would be. And if we can accept from the dominant narrative that the use by “Stalinist” architecture of formal conventions is an expression of the construction of a centralised state apparatus, this line of thought finally gives us an answer to the question the liberal mind never thinks to ask, which is “what is that power for?”

Liberal-bourgeois conceptualisations of politics necessarily understand power as existing for itself. From Harendt to Foucault, “power” has its own autonomy. With no political-economic analysis of the internal contradictions of a given social system, the problem of power is a problem of the distribution of it among otherwise equal persons. A Marxist analysis has no such illusions, and understands power as being tied to given class interests – which is why the dictatorship of the working class is a liberating one, and inclusively is entirely compatible, and indeed dependent on, widespread forms of grassroots participation, as is repeatedly demonstrated by the very studies on social history focused on Soviet new towns the thesis mentioned. The Leninist position is unapologetic in regards to the necessity of use of centralised state power to violently crush counter-revolutionary resistance. But while this is perfectly fine at the level of politics, it is not clear what are the implications of this at the level of urban policy. By following the line of reasoning I have been describing, then the socialist state emerges as, among other things, the grand implementer of “modernist” urbanism. Such implementation requires tremendous amounts of power, for it dramatically changes one of the most fundamental

activities of an economic system, building. It especially alters it through the annihilation of one of the very foundations of the previous system, private property of land. The concentration of such power on a revolutionary state may very well benefit from the use of traditional architectural forms conventionally associated with the image of power. Hence, “modernism with avenues and columns”. The contributions of “the avant-garde” were universalised inasmuch as they operated at an infra-structural, economic level, and were rejected inasmuch as they operated at a supra-structural, ideological level. “Stalinism” then did not oversee the universalisation of the cultural “project” of “the avant-garde”, like Groys proposes, but the removal of the culturalism of the “avant-garde” from the political-economic project of socialism. The historical development of the Soviet architectural debate parsed through the proposals of “the avant-garde” like a kolkhoz combine-harvester, separating the technical, historically operative wheat from the cultural, ideologically operative chaff. “The avant-garde” had to be defeated so that “modernism” could be victorious.

This raises another final point that is closer to the level of analysis the thesis generally functions at – the historiographical consequences of this problem of “formalism” raise again Tafuri’s problem of “operativity”. Tafuri advocated against “operativity” in the sense that the “operativity” of architectural historians was an ideological one committed to the cultural “project” of architecture. The thesis proposed that this ideological “operativity” defines the existence of the very category of “the avant-garde”, and dominates its entire historiography. In the words of the thesis, “the avant-garde” is the historiographical version of “the project”, rescuing in the pages of books the lost cultural agency of the architect, to be reborn again when the conditions were right. But Tafuri in doing so refuses all forms of “operativity” altogether, as the thesis showed, locking the historian in an academic ivory tower within which the conscious mind would remain free in its political uselessness. The thesis has addressed how this was itself a new ideological operation that aimed at installing the independence of the academic intellectual against the intellectual professional, and in broader terms was part of the reconstruction of the “project” upon the collapse of Keynesianism and the rise of post-modernism and neo-liberalism. But now, with the two meanings of “formalism”, appear also two meanings of “operativity” – the “operativity” of the petty-bourgeois intellectual as the ideological “operativity” of culture, in thrall of the middle-class privilege of the professional; but also, and in contrast, the Bolshevik “operativity” of revolution, in which any cultural forms are judged only by how their consequences conjuncturally align with the revolutionary needs. Tafuri helped us show in Part II how the “operativity” of “the avant-garde” is always “positive”, even when it is “negative”. “Negative in form, positive in content”, such is the organic of “avant-garde” “operativity”. What is then the organic of socialist “operativity”? The slogan of

“socialist-realist” architecture answers us: “national in form, socialist in content”. We could easily translate this, following the conjectures of this final section, with “conventional in architecture, modernist in urban planning”. Or also with, in deeper terms, “positive in form, negative in content” – for the “operativity” of the conventional forms are in thrall of the political structures which mission is to produce the genericising, universalising progressive models materially on the territory, and in so doing, dissolving the class privilege of cultural meaning.

Thus was the “dialectic of the avant-garde” inverted. Tafuri’s hope for a “truly negative avant-garde” was itself a form of “avant-garde” utopianism. To achieve the “negative” in the realm of content, of real historical consequences, the dialectic of history imposed the “positive” in the realm of form. New cultural forms have never been the end goal of revolution. They were always means to the end goal, and as such, their use by the revolution is merely tactical. This is what architecture as a discipline, as it has ideologically constructed itself in the bourgeois West, cannot accept. It is therefore not surprising, in this age when the field of the left has become cultural studies and cultural politics instead of political economy and class politics, to see a cultural interpretation of revolutionary politics, constructed around the term “byt”, presenting, in the face of the crisis of capitalism, an architectural alternative of cultural commonality to an actual political praxis of working class organisation. In the words of the event description at the RAA I previously quoted:

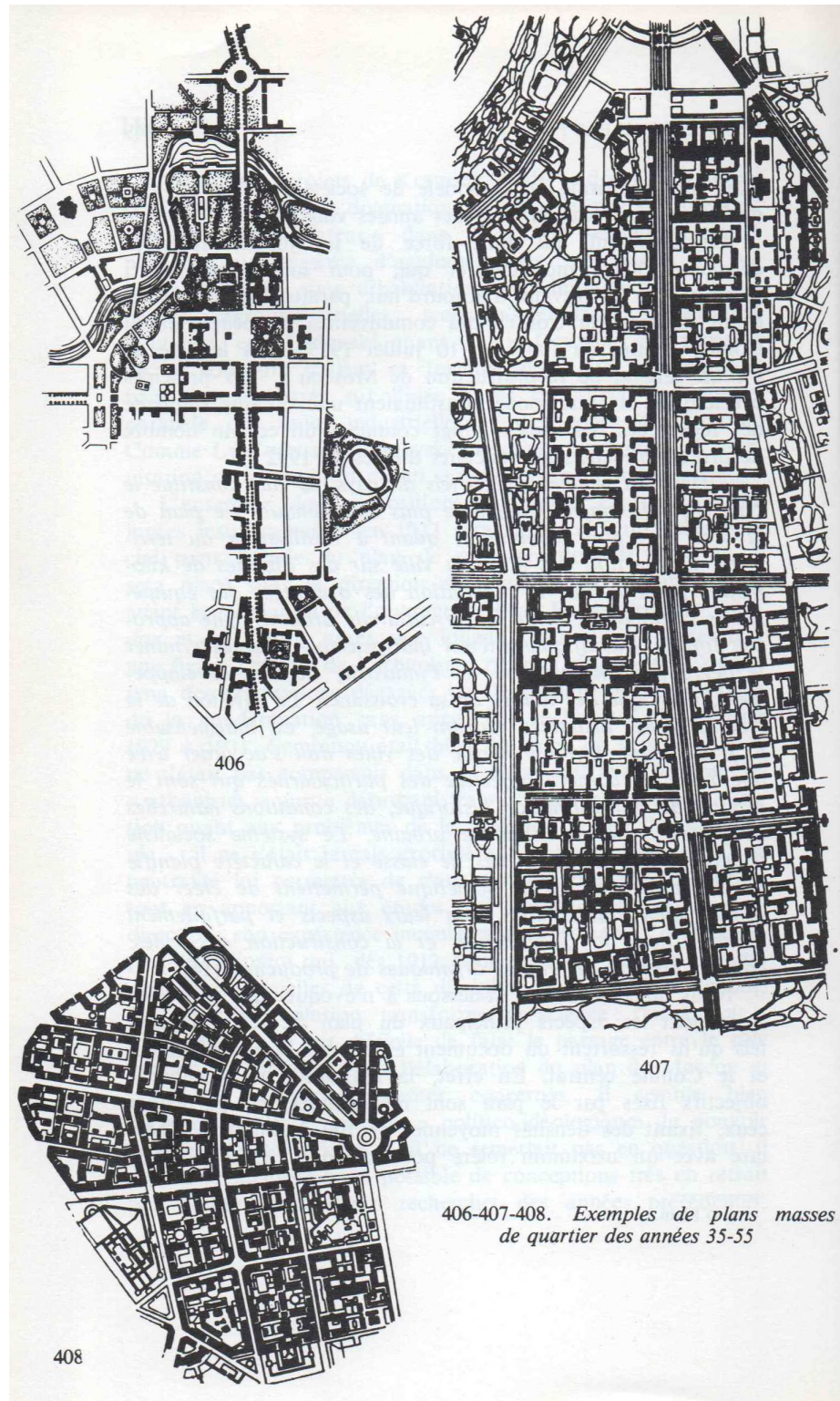
In post-revolution Russia, communal housing was the primary mechanism to create a truly collective society and eliminate the bourgeois domestic sphere.

This is, of course, nonsense. In post-revolution Russia, the primary mechanism was workers’ control over the means of production for the elimination of the bourgeois state. The architectural prerogative of culturalising the revolution in the past amounts to a neutralisation of it in the present. That this ends up merely fetishising capitalist relations instead of combating them is but the contemporary manifestation of the problem Tafuri was attempting to tackle in the short period from 69 to 73. This is the ultimate face of “the project” that the historiography of “the avant-garde”, and especially the Soviet “avant-garde”, carried unto our present under the guise of radical culture. In effect, it is naught but a liberal shackle on an operative politicisation of the architectural discipline.

The historical problem today is, in the ideology of the discipline, to paraphrase Le Corbusier, “byt” or revolution. Architects tend to prefer “byt” because it matches their liberal petty-bourgeois subjectivity. The current historical context however, like that of the 1930s, is demolishing in front of our very eyes such liberal illusions. In such context, the false hope for a non-political cultural progress that “byt” brings is an objective accomplice of reactionary

politics. Just as the Soviet “avant-garde” was historiographically turned into an ally of the “formalism” of Hadid and Schumacher, so is “byt” turned into an ally of the neo-liberal stage of capitalism of both Clinton and Trump. And, in the inevitable failure of its ideological insistence on non-political cultural progressivism, it tends to favour Trump. Realising that, as the centre fails and liberal capitalism is at the gates of a fascist turn, I would abdicate from the delusions of “the avant-garde” of an architected cultural progress, and opt instead for the vanguard of organised political revolution.

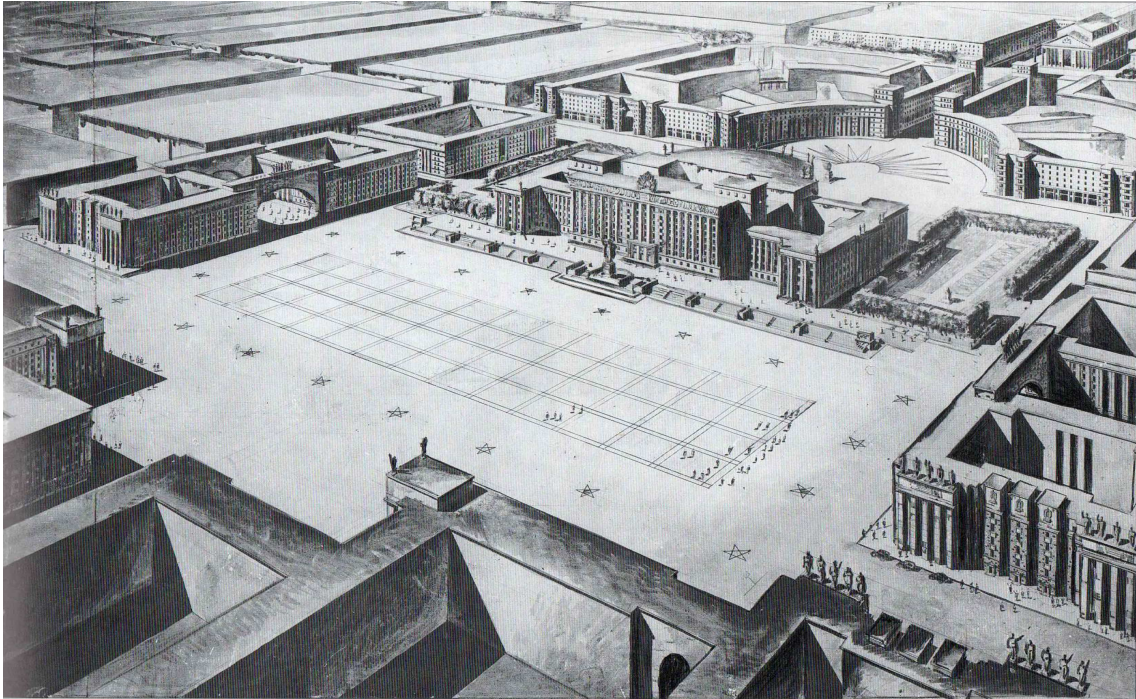
For this one must accept, and embrace, the reduction of culture from the status of engine of progress given to it by the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia, to mere revolutionary tactical “operativity”. This is the lesson of the Soviet architectural debate that must remain forever misunderstood by liberal Western historians and architects – their “formalism” is fundamentally opposed, not to avenues and columns, but to the end of the autonomy of culture.



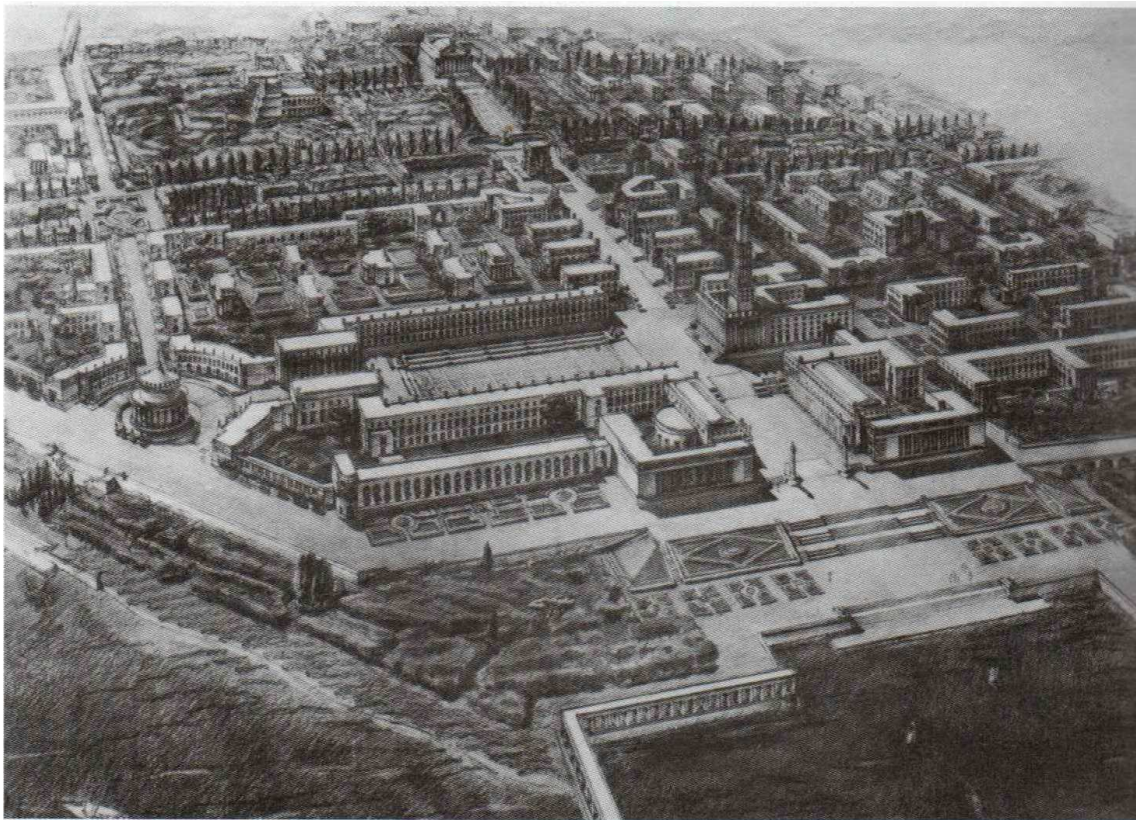
406-407-408. Exemples de plans masses de quartier des années 35-55

Img.5 – Three examples of “Stalinist” urban planning between 1935-1955, found in:

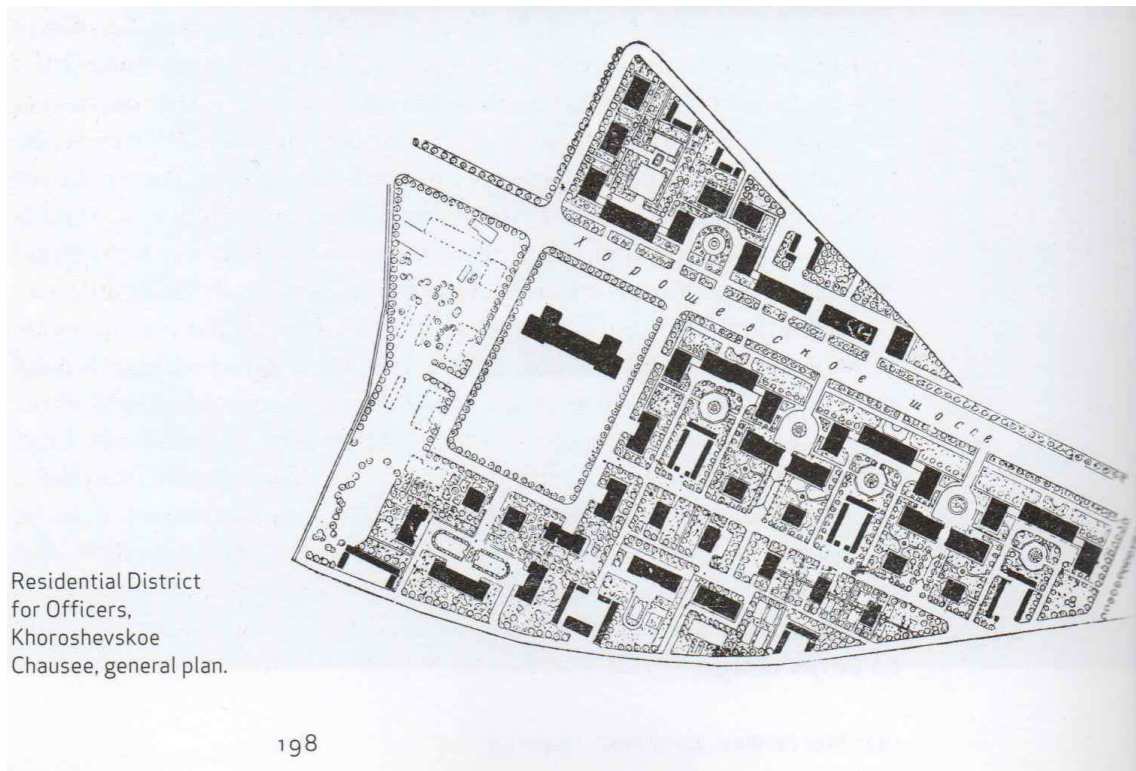
Anatole KOPP, *L'Architecture de la Période Stalinienne*, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, Grenoble, 1978, p.408



Img.6 – Plan for Leningrad’s House of the Soviets and surrounding area, by Noi Trotsky, 1936-1941, found in: Alexei TARKHANOV, Sergei KAVTARADZE, *Stalinist Architecture*, Lawrence King, London, 1992, p.53



Img.7 –Project for the reconstruction of Novorossiisk, by Boris Iofan, 1944-1946, found in:
Richard ANDERSON, *Modern Architecture in History: Russia*, Reaktion Books, London, 2015, p.196



Img.8 – Residential district at the Khoroshevskoe Chausee in Moscow, by Dmitrii Chechulin, 1945-1946, found in:
Richard ANDERSON, *Modern Architecture in History: Russia*, Reaktion Books, London, 2015, p.198

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